涼宮ハルヒの暴走

すずみやはるひのぼうそう

谷川流（ながる）

角川スニーカー文庫

The Rampage of Suzumiya Haruhi

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Prologue — Summer

These are the events that occurred before the filming of that regrettable film, during my senior high school's summer vacation.

It wasn't until a few days after returning from the detective comedy-of-errors staged on that lone island (the "SOS-Brigade Summer Co-ed Trip") that I experienced a taste of the joy of summer vacation.

This so-called co-ed activity was in reality just a forced kidnapping. Originally, I thought that since summer vacation was still young, I should not be getting any flak for sleeping till past noon on the first few days, yet that impatient and heartless president decided to depart on day 1 of the summer vacation, which ripped apart my seamless plan. Thanks to this woman, by the time my body adjusted to "Summer Mode" as it had in past years, there were only a few days left in July.

It need not be mentioned that I had no will to level the mound of summer vacation homework that I carried back from school. It shouldn't be too late to do it in August, so I simply squandered away the month of July. Who knew that come August, I would accompany my energetic, spunky little sister on a rural visit meeting cousins that we hadn't seen in ages, and head to the mountain, or river stream, or the plains, and spend two whole weeks playing? We played till we dropped. I will only admit to it if somebody says that I had it coming.

Naturally, regarding the summer homework that I didn't want to start on, I behaved similar to how birds that learn to avoid poisonous insects would: by not even touching it. As a result, not even one question was answered while the calendar was littered with records of my endeavors. Without noticing, half of August had passed…

"That" seemed to…

…Have become active in the dark.

Endless Eight

It felt rather odd.

I had a bizarre feeling several days after the conclusion of the O-bon Festival.

At the time, I was sitting in my own living room, tuning in and out of the middle school baseball games, which I had little interest in. It was kind of my own fault, being wide awake by afternoon and having nothing to do. Even when bored to death, I lacked the strength to face that hill of a pile of summer homework, so I continued to kill time by watching T.V. like a slouch.

What was being broadcast would be the district tourney, which I was neither fated nor qualified to take part in, but empathy towards the underdog made me cheer for the side losing with a score of 0 to 7. Out of the blue, I had a premonition, a feeling Haruhi was on the move.

I had not seen Haruhi in ages, given I took my little ol' sister to the countryside (where my mom's family estate is) to spend the summer and to pay respect to the ancestors, and had only triumphantly returned the day before. This is a must-go trip every year in our household. Besides, during summer vacation, the members of the SOS Brigade had few opportunities to meet each other, which meant not seeing Haruhi was only to be expected. In addition, on day one of summer vacation, we had fervently followed Her Excellency to that bizarre lone island, and had closed the curtain on that odd and rushed Summer Co-ed event long ago. Even if Haruhi were up to something, there wouldn't be a second "overnight trip." Having that one memory for the summer of this year should've been enough for her to savor.

"But then again…"

As I spoke to myself, for some unknown reason, an event occurred with my silent cell phone suddenly—very suddenly—at the exact moment my finger hooked onto the phone strap and pulled it towards my body, which made me suspect someone might have installed candid cameras in my home.

Just at that moment, right on the dot, the incoming call ringtone began to buzz. *Perhaps I have the power to predict the future!* This thought flashed across my brain, and was immediately terminated with my head shaking in denial – too idiotic.

"What does she want?"

The number on the call display was the cell number of Suzumiya Haruhi.

After letting my phone ring three times, I pressed the "talk" button with elegance. As I had an idea of what Haruhi might say, I was actually rather surprised at myself.

"You free today?"

This was the first sentence to come out of Haruhi.

“At exactly 2 o’clock, have everybody meet in front of the train station, you definitely must come.”

She cut the call off right afterwards. There was no seasonal chitchat nor household greetings, not even a confirmation of whether or not it was I at the receiving end. Most importantly, how did she know I had nothing to do today? *Despite how it all looks, I still… oh, never mind, I really don’t have much to do today.*

The phone rang again.

“What?”

“I forgot to mention what you need to bring along.”

She then quickly went through the list like a machine gun.

“Also, remember to come with a bike and to bring enough money, over~!”

The phone hung up.

I tossed the cell aside and entertained some deep thoughts. *Just what is going on? Why is it I have this strange sensation as if all of this is a dream being dragged on?*

A clean whistling blow came from the television. Right as I looked, the enemy team’s score—the enemy team at least in my mind—was in double digits. The sound of an aluminum bat hitting a baseball proclaimed this fact to me with no reservation.

Summer was coming to an end.

The chorus of the cicada spilled through the walls of the house, which was sealed shut with the AC turned on.

“She’s impossible.”

Haruhi. That woman… was making that co-ed trip to that freakish lone island as soon as summer started not enough? *This summer is hot as hell… just what does she want?* I absolutely did *not* want to leave the air-conditioned room.

Sulk as much as I may, I still meekly headed toward my closet and removed the items she requested.

“Kyon, you’re really slow! Would you please put more effort into it?”

Suzumiya Haruhi tossed a plastic bag about as she pointed at me with her index finger in displeasure. This woman was still in her old form.

“Mikuru, Yuki, and Koizumi all arrived before I did. You, however, would let the chief wait on you… what does that mean? You deserve punishment! *Punishment!*”

I was the last person to show up at our meeting place. I was also fifteen minutes early from the meeting time. It seems everyone knew in advance Haruhi would call us out, which made the gathering lightning fast. Thanks to these gurus, I always have to treat everyone. I’ve gotten used to it and have long since given up. The fact is, I am but an ordinary layman, and arriving ahead of these three individuals with unique backgrounds is an impossible mission.

I paid no attention to Haruhi, and turned to greet the other members unfazed.

“So sorry for making you all wait.”

My greeting to two of the lot mattered little, but this other individual I cannot ignore any detail. Beneath an elegant hat with ribbons, Asahina Mikuru-san released her warm smile and nodded at me.

“Don’t worry, I just got here myself.”

Asahina-san’s hands were grabbing onto a basket. The inside of the basket seemed to be filled with things that arouse anticipation, which made me start to feel eager for them. I had really hoped to be immersed in this pleasant atmosphere forever, but a demon had to come and soil it all.

“Long time no see. Have you been traveling since our last meeting?”

Koizumi Itsuki revealed those glistening white teeth and raised his thumb at me. Even with summer vacation mostly gone, his smiling face still made it seem as if he were secretly scheming something. *Why couldn’t you go on a tour? Why head to Haruhi in a hurry as soon as she calls forth? That, and coming so very early only makes you more suspicious the more I think about it… would saying no to that woman kill you?!*

My vision traveled past that bright pretender’s façade and panned horizontally. Standing over there was the non-organic visage of the emotionless Nagato, who was rather like Koizumi’s shadow. That presence, wearing the summer uniform and not a drop of sweat, standing squarely upright, was one I could not become any more familiar with. I was beginning to suspect she may not have sweat glands.

“…”

Nagato lifted her head and looked at me as if she were looking at a motionless toy mouse, and nodded slightly. Perhaps it was a salutation to me.

“Everyone is here, let’s go!”

I asked out of a sense of duty to Haruhi’s decree:

“Where to?”

“Where else but the city swimming pool?”

I took a look at what I was holding in my right hand: a sport backpack with a towel and my swimwear in it. Oh well, I’d kind of guessed we’d be going to the pool.

“Summer should be like summer, and we should be doing summer activities. Only a penguin or swan would hit the water in the middle of winter.”

With those examples, it was to become a matter of habit and not of recreational purposes. I am not one of those people you can appease with a few inappropriate examples of what animals do.

“Time is fleeting, so we must act the moment we have thought of something! This is the once-in-a-lifetime North High freshman year’s summer vacation!”

As usual, Haruhi seemed to have no plan to listen to others’ suggestions. Truth be told, other than myself, the members didn’t even bother to give any suggestions to Haruhi, so the only ideas that would go in one of her ears and out the other were mine. Rationally speaking, Haruhi was a tad unreasonable… but I sealed my own fate as the only one in the brigade with any common sense. *What an accursed fate this is…*

As I analyzed the differences between fate and destiny –

“Now, let’s head to the pool on bike!”

Haruhi’s royal decree was proclaimed. Even with no approval, the act would be forcefully enforced.

After I asked, I found out even Koizumi was instructed to take a bike along. The trio of ladies came on foot. It is worth mentioning there were only two bicycles and five of us. Just what did this woman have in mind?

Haruhi explained rather happily.

“Just put two people on one bike and three on the other and voila, problem solved. Koizumi-kun, you carry Mikuru-chan. Kyon shall carry Yuki and me.”

And so, I stepped on my pedals as if I would die. I could still stand the scorching heat that had me sweating like a pig, but that racket, which was like the adjustment noise coming from a broken loudspeaker, looped endlessly from the back of my head, driving me nuts.

“Kyon! See that? You’ve been overtaken by Koizumi-kun! Pedal faster and catch up to him!”

My sweat blurred my vision. I could only faintly make out Asahina-san sitting on the side at the backseat of Koizumi’s bicycle as he coyly waved at me. *Why is it Koizumi carries the beauty and I the beast? I almost want to conclude “unfair” is a word that originates from my current situation!*

Both of my legs and my bicycle were struggling to tolerate this crippling overweight. Nagato sat at the rear seat, while the one who was standing on the rear pedestals and holding onto my shoulders would be Haruhi. It rather looked like a three-person riding trick. *Is the SOS brigade preparing to become a circus as well?*

Oh yes, before we hit the roads, Haruhi mentioned this:

“Yuki is diminutive, her weight is featherweight.”

That sentence had its merit. I have no idea if Nagato set her weight to zero or if she was using anti-gravity, but I can say it felt as if I were only carrying Suzumiya Haruhi. *Sigh, I wouldn’t be shocked if Nagato* can *adjust gravity. I would rather like to find out what she is* incapable *of.*

Although if she could do something about Haruhi’s weight it would be great, since my back and my shoulders could clearly feel the crushing force from that woman.

Koizumi, peering back by looking around Asahina-san’s head, revealed that hated Mona Lisa smile of his, which made me appreciate the unfairness of this world, making me start to crack jokes at myself as Balzac did. *Dammit! On the return trip, I will definitely fight for a chance to carry Asahina-san and enjoy the taste of biking with two!* I think undoubtedly this ladies’ bicycle of mine shared the same view.

The municipal swimming pool’s compliments were very crude. It would be more fitting if the name were changed to “The Ghetto Swimming Pool.” The reason would be this facility only had a fifty-meter-wide pool and a watering hole the depth of fifteen centimeters for toddlers.

The only high school students who would come to such a pool are those bored out of their mind, such as us. Otherwise, only little kids and their parents – mothers mostly – would be there. I lost interest the moment I saw only brats in their swim rings were in the pool. *Looks like the only stimulant left for my optic nerves would be Asahina-san…*

“Hmm, the smell of this disinfectant really stinks.”

Under the sunlight, Haruhi, dressed in a deep red Tankini, had her nose sniffing nonstop with her eyes closed. She walked out of the changing room while holding Asahina-san’s hand. Asahina-san, holding a basket with the other hand, was in an overall with frills similar to children’s swimwear, and Nagato was in a plain no-frills competition swimsuit. Both suits

seemed to be hand-picked by Haruhi, who paid little attention to her attire but was meticulous to the fashion of others (especially Asahina-san).

“Jump into the water as soon as you find a place to put down our stuff. We’re gonna compete! Compete! To see who is the fastest at swimming to the other end of the pool.”

I lifted my shoulders and (after exchanging a quick glance with Asahina-san) headed off to the shade to lay the beach towel and drop the bags.

The brats in the pool loitered across the surface like abnormal water striders, making it impossible to swim across in a straight line. The outcome of this fifty-meter brigade-member freestyle in this brutal environment would be an unsurprising win for Nagato.

This girl, who never seemed to take a breath, dove into the pool right away and advanced steadily. She let the water droplets fall freely from her short hair sticking to her cheeks as she waited patiently over at the other end for our arrival. As expected, Asahina-san was dead last. She had to stand to take a breath, and tossed the beach ball that had drifted near her back, which led to her taking ten times as long as Nagato to reach the other side. By the time she got there, she could barely catch her breath.

“It’s an outright lie to say that sport relieves stress! Body is body, brain is brain. Body can move without thinking while brain cannot work without thinking.”

Haruhi revealed a look as if she were on the right side and continued, saying:

“Therefore, let’s do it again. Yuki, this time I am not going to lose to you!”

Has anyone ever taught you that you can’t use “therefore,” a conjunction, in this usage? Just what is this absurdity? You’re just being a sore loser who’s trying to win at least once in overtime.

Therefore, I anticipated anxiously that Nagato would detect this tense atmosphere and get out of the pool. *I’ll let you all duke it out amongst yourselves while I stand on the side as a spectator. I bet on Nagato, who wants to bet on Haruhi?*

Haruhi and Nagato made five trips across the pool and back. Then afterwards, the situation turned into the SOS brigade female trio playing ball with the band of elementary school children. Koizumi and I, unable to cut in, decided that we might as well sit by the sides and watch them play, as there wasn’t much else to look at.

“They’re playing their hearts out.”

Koizumi looked at them.

“Feels like Eden, all’s right with the world. Don’t you also think that Suzumiya-san has learned to enjoy some of the more conventional pastimes?”

It sounds as if he’s talking to me, so I’d better answer him.

“She gives a call out of the blue and hangs up as soon she spilled out everything at once; just what part of this form of invitation is normal?”

“Isn’t there a saying that it’s better to act now than later?”

“The problem though is why is it that the ‘now’ that woman chooses has never been the best of times?”

The baseball tournament and that ridiculously large cricket appeared in my head.

Koizumi continued with a smile:

“That is true, but I would think that this is rather peaceful. Seeing Suzumiya-san laughing so heartily, one would say that world-altering events would not be triggered.”

I wish that would be so.

I drew a long breath purposefully and added a cold sigh in the end…

Just then, Koizumi showed a peculiar look. It was a look that I was familiar with. That is to say, apart from a grin.

“Hmm?”

Koizumi’s eyebrows suddenly locked up.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing…”

The normally punctual Koizumi seemed to have had his tongue tied and looked as if he had something to say… but his smile returned to his face rather quickly.

“It’s likely that I am worrying too much. We faced waves upon waves of events since spring, making me slightly schizophrenic. Ah! They’ve come up.”

I looked toward where Koizumi was pointing. Haruhi approached as she strode about like an Emperor Penguin heading off to feed its children, with a smile plastered all over her face. Asahina-san and Nagato caught up as if they were following the runaway princess.

“It’s about time to eat. The menu today is Asahina-san’s hand-made sandwiches. Street price-wise, these will run no lower than five thousand yen. If auctioned online, fetching five hundred thousand yen would not be surprising. You should thank me earnestly for letting you eat this kind of great stuff.”

“Thank you very much.”

I said it with all my heart, although toward Asahina-san.

Koizumi followed suit after me.

“We’ve been very blessed.”

“No no, it’s nothing.”

Asahina-san ducked her head as she fidgeted her fingers about.

“I don’t know how they turned out… Don’t be too surprised if they taste bad.”

It would be impossible for these to taste bad. Any food that is carefully prepared by Asahina-san’s golden touch, regardless of when and where it was made and what the materials were, is a delicacy of the mortal realm. After all, it boils down to ‘Whodunit’ of the 5W1H (what, who, when, why, where, how) at that point.

As such, I was touched beyond words at being able to enjoy Asahina-san’s hand-made club sandwiches, such that I couldn’t distinguish whether they tasted bad or not. Basically, anything she makes is great. For that matter, even the warm Japanese Tea that she poured forth from her thermos, although not a good match for the sandwich, was truly heavenly. Even the sweet drops of dew from her body made me feel refreshed.

Haruhi swept through her share in a moment, as if she were desperate to dissipate the body heat she had accumulated.

“I am going to swim for a bit. Come to swim when you’re all done.”

After this order, she jumped right back into the pool.

That woman was remarkable, moving about as if nobody were there when in fact obstacles were about in every corner. From the looks of it, it seemed that the theory of human evolution undersea was not without merit. I believe that even if Haruhi’s ancestors were tossed onto the surface of the moon with nothing but their garments they would somehow survive.

Later on, save for Nagato who was dining in a pristine manner, we remaining three drifted toward Haruhi as if we were sea dogs hungry for mates. This time around, Haruhi and the group of elementary schoolgirls were playing water volleyball together.

“Mikuru-chan! Hurry up and come here!”

“Yes.”

Seconds after nodding her head, Asahina-san was hit by the speeding volleyball of steel from Haruhi and sank into the water.

Koizumi and I emerged from the pool only after an hour had passed as we lay around the shores of the pool, crushed by the energetic screeching of toddlers.

No matter how I look at it, we simply don’t fit in here. Just what is Haruhi thinking, picking of all places this municipal pool that barely has any amenities? I’m not asking for water slides, but there should be more suitable facilities for us to go to.

I know that the skin will quickly accumulate melanin under blazing sunlight; as soon as I thought of whether or not Nagato was scouting about in order to find a place to sun tan, I saw that small, silent girl with short hair sitting perfectly still by the shade where our stuff was, gazing at the sky with those sharp eyes of hers.

It was an image that always seemed to be the same: the vision of Nagato sitting still as a doll, constant regardless of her whereabouts.

“Hmm?”

A slight sense of perplexity overtook my heart and vanished in an instant. The bizarre sensation had returned. Just for a brief instant, I felt as if Nagato were bored, and I had a sense of déjà vu. Moreover, I seemed to have some familiarity with what was to come after this. *Oh yeah, Haruhi will say something along the lines of—*

“These two are members of my brigade. If I say east they dare not say west. Come to them if anything comes up.”

I looked back toward the pool to discover that Haruhi had appeared before us with a horde of little girls.

Asahina-san lay her chin on the surface of the water and shut her eyes, perhaps exhausted from playing with the hyperactive elementary school kids. The brimming Haruhi, more carefree than the elementary kids, stared at the glimmering stars and said this to Koizumi and me:

“Join the fun! We’re gonna play water polo and we need two guys as goalkeepers.”

Just as I think of asking what the game’s like and what the rules are, my sense of familiarity vanishes.

"…Umm."

I gave a half-assed reply and stood up. Koizumi joined in with the children with a smile on his face.

That sense of familiarity had totally disappeared.

Umm, never mind. This sort of thing happens. I often feel as if I've seen certain scenes from some dreams normally, plus I'd been to this pool when I was a kid. It might've been that my memories back then were overlapping with the present. Otherwise, it would seem that my brain's data transmission program had developed a minor glitch.

I pushed aside a dolphin shaped swim ring as I hurried after the beach ball that flew away from a head-on impact.

We left the municipal pool only after we were dead tired. Even on the trip back, I still had to repeat that three-rider trick as Koizumi kept up his Gemini tale of youth. This undoubtedly makes one's heart tremble with no end.

Asahina-san sat at the back of the seat with the elegance of a lady, with her white skin amplifying those flushes on her face. My fledgling heart rumbled all the more when one of her hands wrapped around the waist of the rider. If I were to stick my ears to them, I just might have heard the howls of the wind that brushes through the barren ground and slices across the sky.

Following Haruhi's directions, I turned left and right on my bicycle and ended up at the station where we met.

Ahh, I see. I have to treat everyone out of my own pocket.

As soon as we found our seats at the café, I placed a small cold towel atop my head and collapsed on the chair. Meanwhile-

"I have decided on a plan for our next activities, so let's take a look."

Haruhi put a sheet of paper down cautiously and pointed at it with her index finger for us. This was a sheet of A4 torn from a notebook.

"What is this for?"

Haruhi replied slightly proudly.

"This is a plan on how to spend the few remaining days of summer."

"Whose plan?"

"Ours, it's the special SOS Brigade summer activities version!"

Haruhi finished her cold drink in one gulp and continued after requesting a refill:

“I suddenly realized that there’s only two weeks left before summer is over, which shocks me. This is terrible! There are still so many things that should’ve been done, and we’ve got so little time now. As such, we have to make up for it right this instant.

The following lines of text were present on Haruhi’s hand-written proposal.

○ Must-do Events of Summer Vacation
▪ Summer Co-ed.
▪ Pool.
▪ O-bon.
▪ Fireworks Show.
▪ Part-time Job.
▪ Stargazing.
▪ Shooting Practice.
▪ Bug Catching.
▪ Test of Courage.
▪ Other.

Summer fever.

Most likely, some kind of tropical disease was spreading from some unknown jungle and had started to infect humans through media such as mosquitoes. I felt rather sad for the “medium” that had bitten Haruhi. Perhaps it died of food poisoning.

The “Summer Co-ed” and “Pool” had already been crossed off the list, probably because they had long been done.

Of course, that also meant that Suzumiya Haruhi would have every single one of these activities done within two weeks. Then there was the “Other” field. *I wonder if it means that Haruhi still has things planned?*

“I can only think of this much. I will add to this when it comes to me. Mikuru-chan, anything you want to do?”

“Umm…”

I looked at Asahina-san, who was deep in thought, trying to hint a “PASS.” *Oh, please, don’t come up with something extreme.*

“I would like to catch goldfish.”

“OK!”

Haruhi took out her pen and appended that to the list.

Afterwards, she asked both Koizumi and Nagato for input. Nagato shook her head a little, while Koizumi refused with a smile. *They have done the right thing.*

"Sorry, may I take a look at this?"

Koizumi finished his iced coffee au lait in a hurry, and gave the list a thorough read-through. He seemed to be thinking of something, but was slightly lost in it… *wonder what he's thinking about.*

Nagato was sipping her cola through her straw for some time –

"Thank you."

Koizumi put the so-called plan back onto the table and kept his thoughts going. *Just what is he up to?*

"We'll start tomorrow. Let's meet in front of the station! Anyone know a place nearby where an O-bon festival is going to take place? A fireworks festival is fine as well."

Couldn't you at least do your research before proceeding?

"I will look into it."

Just like Koizumi to clean up after her.

"I will contact Suzumiya-san as soon as I have obtained the information. We are after O-bon and fireworks festival locations for now, right?"

"Don't forget about goldfish catching, Koizumi-kun. This is Mikuru-chan's only request."

"Then I will do what I can to find a location where O-bon and the Summer Festival are held together."

"Umm, please do. I'll leave this to you then, Koizumi-kun."

Haruhi finished off the ice cream that was floating about in her cup of ice coffee, and folded up her note carefully as if it were some kind of treasure map.

Just as I was paying for the bill, Haruhi rushed out of the store like a marathon runner just before the competition. Maybe she was just storing energy and waiting until tomorrow to spend it. I hoped that she would burn it through at once and not make it last, which would save us all the trouble of cleaning up afterwards.

The four members dismissed themselves, and as everyone started to part ways, I called for the shadow-like one of them.

“Nagato.”

The organic intelligent android, dressed in summer sailor outfit, turned around to answer my call.

“…”

She looked at me emotionlessly. You couldn’t tell if she was denying or affirming from those widened, inorganic pupils of hers on her white face.

There was something odd about it. Although Nagato had always been emotionless, I still felt that there was something odd about Nagato today, but I couldn’t quite put a finger on exactly what.

“Nothing…”

It was rather awkward to call her, and then realize that I didn’t have much to say to her.

“It’s nothing. How are you lately? Is everything all right?”

I really couldn’t think of a thing to say, so I was left with chitchat to break the ice.

Nagato’s eyes blinked, and slightly, so slightly that you’d have to use a protractor to the measure the angle, she nodded.

“I am fine.”

“That’s good.”

“Really.”

Her face, which seemed to be more or less set with little motion, was somehow more concrete… No, on the contrary, it seemed to have softened… Why would I have such contradictory thoughts? I don’t get it. Maybe human perception is just that bad? It’s best to just let it slip.

In the end, since I couldn’t think of anything to say, I came up with some parting words on the spot and left as if I were running away from Nagato.

I felt that it was probably for the best for some reason. I rode my bicycle home, hit the shower as soon as I finished my dinner, turned on the T.V. when I got out of the bath, and fell asleep while watching T.V.

Haruhi’s call woke me from my lazy sleep once more the next morning.

The O-bon festival location had been found. It was to take place that night, and it was at the civic stadium in the city… according to her.

How could it all work out so well? Just as I was feeling amazed at how everything fit together, Haruhi continued, saying:

"We're going to buy yukata together."

Sounds like it's time for morning exercise class to start.

"Originally I wanted everyone to wear them at Tanabata but I forgot about it. I really don't know what was wrong with me. Luckily, I am saved thanks to the fact Japan has the tradition of wearing yukata for two months."

Who's saved?

Just to add, it was morning then. I was just thinking that meeting by dusk would be fine, but Haruhi had me up so early just for this matter. So, just as it was the day before, the majestic Haruhi, the pitiful Asahina-san, the silent Nagato, and the merry Koizumi all headed to the old meeting place by the train station.

"Both Mikuru-chan and Yuki lack yukata while I forgot mine. I saw a place when I walked past the shopping district where they were selling the set complete with slippers, so we'll just go there later and get them."

I looked to Asahina-san and Nagato, wondering how they might look in yukata.

Sigh, it's summer.

Koizumi and I would do with just casuals. We're guys; merely wearing yukata while in a hotel for the heck of it is enough. Besides, men aren't that attractive in them anyway.

"Yea, Koizumi-kun in a yukata would be a great fit, but as for you…"

Haruhi looked at me from head to toe with a grimace.

"All right, off we go."

She then bossed us around with her self-prepared brigade fan.

"Destination: yukata shop!"

Haruhi dashed headlong into the volume store, single-mindedly picked out the patterns for Asahina-san and Nagato, and then rushed into the dressing room.

The ladies (save Nagato) had no idea how to put on the yukata, so they asked the saleswomen for help, which ate up a lot of time. Koizumi and I idled about outside the display filled with women's fashion for a long time before the trio finally showed up in front of the dressing mirror.

Haruhi's yukata pattern was made up of delicate Fuso (Hibiscus), Asahina-san's had goldfish of all colors, while Nagato's had run-of-the-mill geometric patterns. I didn't know which to look at first, as each of the three dazzled differently.

The clerks glanced at Koizumi and me, perhaps guessing at "who's the boyfriend to which of the three ladies?" A pity, for it's neither. Leaving Koizumi aside for the time being, I was just a tag-along. Perhaps I should've felt some regret at the moment over this.

Never mind that. So long as I see the yukata version of Asahina-san, I have no more regrets for my lifetime. Haruhi and Nagato each fit their attire and had their flair, but I won't be able to do them justice if I try to describe their look.

"Mikuru-chan, you…"

Haruhi's exhilaration after seeing the yukata version of Asahina-san was no less than mine.

"You look sooo cute! I am impressed with myself, having an eye for fashion! You in a yukata can swoon 95% of all men!"

What's with the 5%?

"Cause a real GAY will not be swayed no matter how cute a girl is. Please remember this: out of a hundred men, five are GAY."

I don't see a point of keeping that in my mind.

Asahina-san didn't seem to deny her own cuteness, as she kept turning about in front of the mirror, judging her own attire.

"So this is the traditional wardrobe of this country. Although a bit tight in the chest, it does look pretty good…"

This would be the most formal and fitting garment out of all the costumes that Haruhi had forced onto Asahina-san. It was not nearly as revealing as the bunny-suit, nor was it as provoking as the maid uniform, for this was a normal outfit for the season, a symbol of summer, which nobody would leer at. This set matched her perfectly. It felt as if I were looking at my sister in yukata, aside from the overly voluptuous bust. However, it's all right as long as it's cute. Asahina-san radiated a divine glow that seemed able to purify the sins of this world. *I would stand up for her even if she was the mastermind behind a bank robbery, whereas if it were Haruhi then I'm not too sure…*

Thanks to Haruhi calling us out early (the woman had no time management skill), there was still a ton of time left before the festival started. As such, we ended up killing time by standing around at the park outside the station. Haruhi "helped" to tie Nagato's and Asahina-san's hair. The ever-changing hairstyles on the two girls sitting as still as marionettes were so awe-inspiring that I would like to have taken sequential shots with a camera in commemoration. It wasn't until sundown that we lined up at the stadium.

The O-bon festival ground, already busy before dusk, was suddenly flocked with people coming in waves from out of nowhere. It's unbelievable how such a crowd can be gathered.

"Waa!"

Asahina-san exclaimed without reservation.

"…"

Nagato remained emotionless to the event.

The feeling crept back at me, but I hadn't seen such live events often. *Why is it that I think I've seen this before… this is the O-bon dance of all things!*

"Hmm?"

It hit me again; this déjà vu came to me like a headache. I kept thinking that I'd been there recently, even though I was telling myself that I had not been in there for the longest time. *It's all so familiar… the platform in the center of the stadium, the outlying festival stands littered about…*

But just as I was about to catch the tattered strands of the spider web dangling in the air, the feeling vanished.

I heard Haruhi's voice.

"Here's the goldfish stand that you've been so excited about. Just keep scooping. You get two hundred extra points if you can get the one with black exposed eyes."

Haruhi dragged Asahina-san's hand toward the goldfish tank over the stand after making up bogus rules on the spot.

"Let's join in. Let's see who scoops up more!"

I vetoed Koizumi, the game addict's proposal. Even if I were to bring the goldfish home, I had no tank to keep it in. I had more interest in the finger-licking food stands with their tempting aroma that surrounded us.

"Nagato, want to grab a bite?"

Her expressionless eyes focused on me for the longest time, and gradually shifted their focus. The mask stand was in her direct line of vision. It's hard to understand what the girl likes.

"Never mind, let's just take a look around."

The loudspeaker played the easy-listening type of festival music like it was chanting. Lured by the music, I led Nagato to the mask stand as I felt the slightly overbearing "glow" of Koizumi.

"Although it's a great haul I don't need this many, just taking one is ok. Mikuru-chan didn't get any so this is hers."

A plastic bag dangling by a string was held in Asahina-san's hand. Within the bag was an orange standard-fare goldfish, swimming about in a carefree fashion. Every move of Asahina-san, like grabbing on the plastic rope, was absolutely adorable. When I saw her other hand clutching a caramel apple stick, I decided to get one for my little'ol sister. Making her giddy once in a while can't hurt.

Haruhi, on the other hand, kept playing around with a water ball with her left hand, and talked to us while her right was holding on a plate full of Takoyaki.

"One each only."

Showing this kind of generosity to us… in this fashion. Just as I was enjoying the Takoyaki dipped in sauce -

"Eh? Yuki, how'd you get the mask?"

"It was purchased."

Nagato muttered as she stared at the toothpick with the Takoyaki on it. On a side of her head was the mask of silver Ultraman from the Kingdom of Light. What generation is beyond me, but I figure the wavelength must overlap somewhat for this alien, since this of all masks is what made her bring out her frog-mouth style coffer from her sleeve.

With everything Nagato's done for me, I felt that I should at least buy such a trinket for her, but Nagato refused and paid out of her own pocket. *Hmm… What is her source of income?*

The four corners of the platform were surrounded by women and children dancing to the tune of Tanko-bushi. It looked as if they were members of the women and children society, as the typical laymen coming here for the show won't really do it and, of course, we wouldn't as well.

Asahina-san's eyes were transfixed upon the group of dancers. She looked as if she were witnessing aborigines welcoming her into an unknown part of the new world.

"Wa…aah"

She exclaimed softly. *Is the tradition of o-bon dance lost in the future?*

Under the leadership of Haruhi, our motley crew toured the festival together. She made us her peons, saying, "Let's eat that," then, "Let's try this." Haruhi was enjoying herself, and so it seemed was Asahina-san, which made me happy. I couldn't tell if Nagato was having a good time, and I don't give a damn about Koizumi's experiences.

Koizumi, from time to time, would fall into this peculiar silence and display his smile without warning… No doubt that his emotions were anything but stable as of late. *Perhaps this is the fate that all members of the SOS Brigade must face.*

When it comes to summer vacation, it's gotta be a grand holiday.

I would've gotten my ticket's worth just seeing the yukata-clad trio.

That's why, the moment Haruhi suggested:

"Let's go shoot up some fireworks, fireworks! It's rare for us to come out in yukata like this so we might as well get all of this done today!"

This motion received unanimous approval from the SOS Brigade. We purchased those crude fireworks that you give to kids, and headed to the riverbank under a night sky so murky that you could only make out the moon and Mars. We followed Haruhi, who grabbed herself a cheap lighter and a Polaroid camera en-route. Haruhi seemed to be in higher spirits than usual. For some reason, the phrase "you are what you wear" flashed through my mind.

One would pay no heed to Haruhi's terrible broad stepping postures upon seeing her swiveling hair tied up behind her head. Evidently, being headstrong is Haruhi's strength.

An hour later, I had taken countless photos. There was Asahina-san holding the angel stick with her marble eyes wide open, Haruhi crouching about with both her hands holding the dragon cannon, and Nagato transfixed upon the swerving snake. The SOS Brigade's summer activity came to an end with this finale.

Koizumi picked up some shrapnel that had fallen into the stream and put it in a convenience store plastic bag. Haruhi gave him a look and put a finger to her lips—

“Then tomorrow will be bug-catching.”

She was determined to exhaust every last item on that itinerary of events.

“Haruhi, I’m not against it, but did you finish your summer assignments?”

I really had no right to say this, since I hadn’t even picked up my pen yet. Haruhi suddenly looked dumbfounded.

“What the hell are you talking about? I only need three days tops to get those done, piece of cake. I had them done by July, actually. Get rid of the tedious stuff so you can really enjoy yourself, that’s the way to really enjoy summer!”

When Haruhi gets serious, that little mound of work is nothing. Why did God give her such a brilliant brain? This shows that God isn’t fair.

Haruhi handed her order out to us with a relentless glare:

“Hear this? Tomorrow, everyone’s gotta bring along a bug catching net and a cage. Oh yeah, let’s see who’s gonna catch the most. Whoever wins gets to be the leader for a day.”

I didn’t care for that title. *Wait. Is it ok as long as it’s bugs?*

“Hmm… cicadas only! That’s right. This is the SOS Brigade Cicada Hunt Competition. As for rules… No type restriction, one is one and wins by the numbers.”

Haruhi, who only needed her own approval, started to fool around with the Brigade fan as if it were a net. *Net and cages… I should still have a set in the storage room somewhere in my home.*

With that, when I finally returned home, I realized that I’d forgotten to get myself an apple stick.

For some reason, although I’d nailed a Teru teru bozu just to make sure it would be pouring, it had to be totally clear in the down the day after. No doubt the cicadas would be jittery over the highest temperature in the summer.

“Cicadas are edible right? It might taste real good if we fry them into tempura. Ahh, this suddenly occurs to me, tempura’s great because of the flour coating maybe? If it is, then cicada tempura must be tasty.”

You try that yourself!

The scene of five high school students of uneven height heading off together with a net and a cage each to go after bugs can only be described as somewhat bizarre.

We gathered ourselves before noon. In order to search for greens, we found ourselves at North High, since the school is on top of a hill that has trees but not much else. This makes it a good place for bugs, as they operate in forests or woods. From the looks of it, even if I live in a fairly busy city, it's not so dismal that cicadas won't cry.

Trunk after trunk was packed with the screeching bugs as if there were an infestation of cicadas. It was grab-as-you-go there. Asahina-san found a harvest with just a couple of furious swipes with her net. This shows that cicadas there did not realize that humans are the animal to watch for most of all. *Fine, then, today is shock therapy time.*

I bent to look at the still cicadas within the cage after filling it in no time. I have no idea how many years they'd stayed underground, but no doubt they did not toil to maturity just to be fried by Haruhi. I felt a sense of melancholy from the weakening cries of the summer bugs, and the sin of deceit crept in on me. *I apologize for destroying your homes with paved cement roads. I hope you can somewhat forgive mankind's insolence.*

I knew that it was impossible for Haruhi to hear my mental soliloquy, but that woman said the following:

"The spirit of catch-and-release is still much needed. Let's spare 'em. Maybe in the future they'll return the favor."

I felt weak the moment I imagine man-sized cicadas knocking at our doors. If there were insects that would return the favor after witnessing us capturing their brethren and setting them free later on, they would be as idiotic as insects. If they came for revenge, I think they would actually be smarter.

Haruhi opened the cage and shook it left and right.

"Go! Go back to the mountains!"

Jijiji~ the cicadas crowded and pushed inside the cage as they scrambled to fly out. Asahina let out a cute cry as she knelt down. The swarm twirled around her for quite some time and swept past the still head of Nagato, following a spiral pattern or in a line as they disappeared into a sky dyed red from the setting sun.

I opened the cage like Haruhi did. I felt as if I were Pandora, who opened that box delivered by Hermes accidentally. The thought of keeping at least one cicada hit me only after all the cicadas had vanished into thin air.

The event for the following day was part-time work.

Haruhi somehow managed to find work, and made sure that we all had a share. That one-day employment was—

“W… Welcome!”

Asahina-san seemed to squeeze out the greeting.

“C’mon, everybody line up! Ahhahh… Don’t push!”

The job that Haruhi stuffed down our throats was to attract customers for an annual sale at a local supermarket.

We met without a clue as to what we were in for and suited up in the uniforms that Haruhi handed to us. After that, we had been carrying out promotion activities since ten in the morning.

By the way, all of us were stuffed into costumes.

Why is this happening… Why must I be embarrassed like this? Asahina-san’s duty is to cheer people up with hundreds of getups… Koizumi, Nagato, what is with you two? Would it kill you to raise even the slightest of objections? Why would you simply bear that woman’s whims?

“Plese line upu~ Thank juu for your cooperation!”

Hearing Asahina-san’s thick tongued voice beneath a green uniform that covered her body only made me sweat like a pig.

We were all dressed up as frogs. To be more precise, frogs that give out balloons to children. This supermarket does this kind of thing every year for its anniversary — handing out free balloons to the infants that accompany the customers.

Kids are kids. They squirm in excitement after receiving this kind of petty gift which is designed to fool them. *Hey, dumb kid over there, take a balloon. It’s a red balloon, just take it.*

Asahina-san the tree frog proved the most popular. As an aside, Koizumi was a golden frog and I was a toad (What else would I be?). Nagato the amazon hornfrog operated the pump that filled up the balloons, which the three of us handed out. Haruhi, however, sat in the shade in casual attire. *If we were all to be paid on the same wage, I would be lashing out right about now.*

It appeared that the owner of the store was an acquaintance of Haruhi. The fellow greeted her with a smile whenever she called out “uncle~” oh-so-sweetly.

The balloons were all handed out within two hours. Save Haruhi, all of us shed our exoskeletons to vent the heat inside the rest area that looked like a storage room. At that moment, I understood the feelings of snakes that shed their skin. It is a rarity for me to experience that sigh of relief.

Nagato took off the frog suit quickly, while Asahina-san and Koizumi were totally dampened and literally shook off their suits. They remained silent for a long while.

“Fuu~”

I didn't even have the energy to enjoy Asahina-san wearing a thin sport vest and a short skirt as she sat down.

"Good job!—"

I had a sudden urge to bury Haruhi from head to toe in a scorching desert when she appeared licking an ice cream.

Evidently, our wages had been pledged to the treefrog suit. I realized that Haruhi had the suit in her mind all along when she calmly announced this news. I should have seen it as she squeezed the empty suit under her armpit with an expression like that of a knight awarded with thousands of gold bullion. The wages never existed.

"What's so bad about this? I've really wanted it. Now this dream has come true. Uncle says that he'll hand this to me on the account of Mikuru-chan. Mikuru-chan, I will hand you a self-made badge. You'll have to wait though since I haven't made it yet."

Thus, one more piece of garbage could be added to Asahina-san's possessions. I imagined that junk must be a cuff that has "badge" written on it.

However—

"This frog is going to be a keepsake in the Brigade classroom. Mikuru-chan, you can wear this whenever you like. I grant you this privilege!"

I couldn't show my anger because I was just so suffused with rage from Haruhi's expressions at that moment.

I was bushed. Nonstop activities, first with swimming, then bug catching, and finally the sauna bath in costumes, would drive the healthiest of high school males to the ground.

This is why I asked for nothing more than sound sleep for the night. I could still feel the peace from Arcadia when the mobile phone rang.

There is nothing more infuriating than a pointless midnight call that disturbs your sleep. Whoever makes calls during the heat of the night must lack common sense, and out of everyone I know, only Haruhi lacks common sense. I really wanted to scream at that woman for waking me from my dazed sleep. To my surprise, when I pressed the talk button, the voice that came through belonged to—

"…Uuu(cry)… Uuu(soft cry)…"

The cry of a woman gave me goosebumps. My senses returned to me suddenly. *Shoot, wrong number.*

Just as I was about to toss my phone—

"Kyon-kun…"

Although the throat was choked up, I could still identify the voice of Asahina-san.

Goosebumps broke out once more, but it had a different meaning this time.

"Hello, is that Asahina-san?"

Was she bidding me farewell with this call? Kaguya-hime needed to return to the Lunar palace? I was well aware that "here" was but a temporary dwelling for Asahina-san and that she must return to the future someday. Would the time be now? I would not agree with simply uttering a farewell before leaving.

Although the woman on the other end of the line was—

"It's me… Uwaaa, it's horrible… Uuu… Ugu… If this keeps up… I… Uwaaa…"

I couldn't understand a word that was coming from her. She was slurring like an elementary schoolchild, and she mixed her sniffings in between, so I couldn't decipher anything. Just as I was at a loss for words—

"Hello, this is Koizumi."

The crisp voice replaced the cries of Asahina-san.

What? Those two are together at this time of the day? Why am I not there? Koizumi, you have exactly five seconds to keep your head glued to your neck in which you can give me a satisfying and comprehensible answer to all of this.

"Something has occurred. This is rather troublesome, so Asahina-san contacted me in advance out of urgency."

Contacting you instead of me? This rather left a bitter taste in my mouth.

"This is due to your inability to resolve the issue even if you are approached first… No, I apologize. In reality, I can do nothing since the situation is quite perilous."

I scratched my head.

"Did Haruhi trigger Armageddon?"

"Strictly speaking, no; rather, it could be said as a complete negation of that. We have been thrust into a situation in which Armageddon will never come."

Huh? Am I dreaming, or not? Just what are you trying to say?

Koizumi continued, despite my confusion.

"I have just contacted Nagato-san. As I have predicted, she seems to be well aware of the situation. You will understand the details if you ask Nagato-san. That sums up the situation. Could you come and meet us right now? Of course, I will not notify Suzumiya-san."

Of course I could. Whoever would leave a weeping Asahina-san behind should see worse than being burnt at the stake sevenfold.

Koizumi informed me of the location, which was right in front of the station. It seemed that the area was the SOS-reserved meeting spot.

As such, by the time I'd changed, stumbled out to the courtyard, jumped onto my bicycle, and then dashed to the meeting spot, three shadows were already awaiting my arrival. The streets were not totally deserted, as I still spotted a few pedestrians who seemed to be students. Thanks to them, we could mix in with this crowd and head to some rave party. It's just that I was getting tired.

Asahina-san was in a squatting position when I got to the station. Flanking her were Koizumi, donned in simple attire, and Nagato, in sailor uniform. Asahina-san's top and bottom simply did not match; perhaps she wore whatever she grabbed. No doubt she either was too panicked to have noticed, or the situation was so grievous that her wardrobe was the last thing on her mind.

The taller of the wingmen noticed my arrival and raised a hand to greet me.

"Just what has happened?"

The soft streetlights illuminated the mild façade of Koizumi.

"I apologize for asking you to appear at this hour. However, the situation has left Asahina-san in her current state."

Asahina-san, who had curled into a ball, cried like a melting snowman. The damp face with a flattened mouth lifted up to look at me, and those beautiful wet cheeks were clearly visible. That seductive look would leave me doing anything for her.

"Uuu… Kyon-kun, I…"

Asahina-san sniffled and muttered to herself:

"I cannot return to the future anymore…"

“To lay it all on the table, what has transpired is just this: We have found ourselves in an endless recursion of time.”

Koizumi seemed to have too small a table with too few items. *Does he really understand what he says?*

“I understand. There is no clearer explanation for this matter. I have discussed the topic with Asahina-san…”

Couldn’t you wait until I arrived before engaging in discussion?

“We found that the flow of time in the world as of late is erratic. This is to the credit of Asahina-san; if not for her, I could not be certain of this fact.”

Certain of what?

“We will keep experiencing the events that have occurred in the same timeframe.”

You’ve said this before.

“To be precise, from August the seventeenth to the thirty-first.”

Koizumi’s words sounded rather bizarre to me.

“In other words, we are forever trapped in a never-ending summer vacation.”

“It is very much summer vacation right now.”

“It is an ENDLESS SUMMER that will not terminate itself. Within this world, let alone fall, not even September will come. In other words, this world has no future beyond August. Asahina cannot return to the future for this reason, and it is logically sound. One cannot contact the future if the future does not exist, which can be taken as self-evident.”

It is senseless in physics to think of NO FUTURE. Time should flow on its own even if you ignore it. I said the following as I looked at Asahina’s head:

“Who would believe such a thing?”

“At least you must, since none of this can be mentioned to Suzumiya-san at all.”

Koizumi looked over at Asahina-san as well.

Later on, Asahina-san basically explained this issue to me. Of course, sniffles were intertwined with the explanation.

“Uuu… Lemme think… I have continued to use **classified information** to contact the future or to do **classified information**… Urr. I only feel something is wrong when I have had no contact from **classified information** for a week. And then **classified information**… Makes me very worried, so I tried to use**classified information** and the answer was **classified information**… Uuu… Waa! Whatever should I do…”

What to do? I have no clue. Is **classified information** *some highly sensitive words that must be censored?*

“Are we by any chance trapped in one of those bizarre worlds created by Haruhi? Like a physical version of closed space or something similar?”

Koizumi hugged his chest as he leaned on the vending machine, slowly contradicting my argument.

“This time, Suzumiya-san did not recreate the world, but instead severed time, from August seventeenth through the thirty-first. As such, this world right now only has a lifespan of two weeks. There is no time before the seventeenth, nor is there any from the first of September on. In other words, this is a world where September will never arrive.”

He took a long sigh, as if whistling defeat.

“Time will reset when it reaches twenty-four o’clock on the thirty-first of August, returning to the seventeenth. I don’t know the details, but it appears that there is a SAVE POINT at the dawn of the seventeenth.”

Then what of our… No, the memory of all of humanity?

“They will all be readjusted. The collective memory of all humans throughout the two weeks will be zeroed and restarted from the beginning.”

This world really enjoys turning time about back and forth. This can’t be helped, though, with a time traveller in our midst.

“No, this does not involve Asahina-san. It is not as simplistic as you have speculated.”

How would you know?

“Only Suzumiya-san possesses the qualities to undertake such an endeavor. Who might you have in mind of other than her?”

Those who would think about who is responsible for such things when they’re bored are either absent-minded or daydream all the time.

“Just cut to the chase and tell me what to do about this.”

“That would be much easier if I had a solution for this problem.”

For some reason, I thought Koizumi looked rather gleeful, with no sign of concern. *Why is that?*

“Because I have finally resolved this feeling of incoherence which has puzzled me for some time.”

Which would mean that only you are out of the woods.

“You as well, I assume? Have you not experienced a powerful sense of déjà vu, from the day we visited the city pool up till now? In retrospect, those flashbacks are remnants of the previous incarnation—as there is no other explanation. Now, all of this has been addressed. The anomalies that we experience are the remaining segments from the reset.”

Wouldn’t all human beings have felt this?

“Supposedly, no. You and I are special exceptions. It appears that only those who are near Suzumiya-san are likely to experience the changes to the world.”

“What of Haruhi? Does that woman have no sense whatsoever?”

“It seems not. If she did, this matter would be far more complicated…”

Koizumi glanced in the direction of Nagato, asking for the alien’s input.

Nagato answered with a calm expression.

“This would be the fifteen-thousand four hundred ninety-eighth time.”

A spell of dizziness set in.

Fifteen-thousand four hundred ninety-eight. That takes up thirty-seven letters. Arabic numeral notation is 15,498, which feels like a lot less. The Arabic numeral is brilliant. Whoever thought of this deserves my profuse thanks. You are incredible for developing this convenient, nonessential, and completely illogical notation.

“The same two weeks have repeated for more than ten thousand times. Assuming any layperson could feel that they were trapped in this loop and memory accumulated, they would break down. As for the memories of Suzumiya-san, I suspect that they must have been wiped much more thoroughly than ours.”

One must consult the oracle in such moments. I asked for Nagato’s confirmation:

“Is this so?”

“Yes.”

Nagato nodded.

“So we have already done whatever it is we will be doing tomorrow? Would the O-bon and the goldfish be like that as well?”

“Not necessarily.”

Nagato conveyed not a shred of emotion.

“There are discrepancies with Suzumiya Haruhi’s activities within the last fifteen-thousand four hundred ninety-seven cycles.”

She looked toward me slightly and continued.

“In the last fifteen-thousand four hundred ninety-seven cycles, O-bon has been omitted twice. O-bon sans goldfish catching occurred a total of four hundred thirty-seven times. The city pool has been visited without fail as of this cycle. Part-time work has been conducted a total of nine-thousand twenty-five times with six variations in the nature of the work. Other than distributing balloons, there has also been stock loading, cash register, flyer distributions, call answering, as well as a model fashion show. There have been six-thousand eleven balloon distributions, with three hundred sixty overlaps in two or more variations. Repeated iterations sorted by order of combination are—”

“That’s enough, you don’t have to continue.”

I started to think to myself after the alien-made artificial human quieted down.

The last two weeks of August have been repeated for fifteen thousand and… how many hundred again? Argh… annoying. 15,498 times, there we go. The cycle begins anew after the thirty-first of August and returns to the seventeenth. That, and I have no recollection of this, and Nagato remembers this to the last detail—why is that?

“Nagato-san, or more precisely the Data Integration Entity, exists outside the boundaries of space and time.”

The rather proud smile of Koizumi seemed a bit stiff, maybe because of the lighting.

Never mind, that’s not important, just leave it for now. I knew Nagato’s cranium could withstand such a thing, but that wasn’t my concern. What I was concerned with was…

“Nagato, you have experienced the events of these two weeks for 15,498 times as well?”

“Yes.”

Nagato nodded as if it didn't matter. *Can't you reveal more than just a simple yes?* Although I couldn't think of what she might say other than that word. But—

"Hmm…"

Wait. 15,498 x two weeks. The total would be 216,972 days. Eh—roughly 594 years worth of days. This girl had carried on through the passing of every single one of those days, every single cycle, and had witnessed everything that had occurred nonchalantly. Even the most patient of humans would be drained of patience after that. If you don't believe me, try and take 15,498 dips in the city pool.

"You…"

I hushed myself the moment I let out that word. Nagato cocked her head like a bird as she stared into me.

A vibe that emanated from Nagato by the swimming pool reawakened. She looked rather bored at that moment, which I suppose wasn't my fault. Even for Nagato, having to relive such a moment so many times would no doubt be toiling. *Although on the surface she hasn't uttered a word of complaint, she might be cursing in the dark…* This thought flashed through my head. I finally had a grasp on what was going on, but the underlying reasons hadn't been verified.

"Why would Haruhi do such a thing?"

"I have a personal hunch."

With his typical opener, Koizumi continued:

"Suzumiya-san perhaps has no wish for summer vacation to end. Because she thinks that way inside her mind, summer vacation has become an endless recursion."

Isn't that like the reason brats refuse to go to school?

Koizumi subconsciously touched the rim of his can of coffee.

"I suspect that she might be half-heartedly preparing for the new semester, since she did not finish all the things that she wanted to do during the last two weeks of summer. In other words, there are many regrets in her. As such, she faces the evening of the thirty-first with an unfulfilled heart…"

And as soon as she wakes up, there are two weeks worth of summer vacation waiting for her, right? How should I put this… I suppose melancholy more than defeat described my current mentality. I know she is one who is able to do just about anything to get what she wants, but never had I imagined that her thickheadedness could reach such heights.

"If so, what must be done before the woman will be satisfied?"

“I do not know. Nagato-san, do you know?”

“No.”

The answer came in a crisp fashion. *Out of all of us, you are the most dependable!* I couldn’t refrain from projecting my thoughts.

“Why is it that you have said nothing? We’ve ended up dancing a two-week waltz thousands of times.”

After a spell of silence, Nagato said, lightly:

“My duty is to observe.”

“…I see.”

This gave me some closure. Nagato had not been actively involved in any of our events up till now, but her existence was pivotal to virtually every single event. I daresay that the only time this girl had engaged others actively would be that time when she led me to her home. With that being the only exception, Nagato had participated with us by manning a vital position without a sound.

I hadn’t forgotten that Nagato Yuki is a humanoid interface made by the Data Integration Entity to communicate, as well as a biological android created to observe Suzumiya Haruhi. I wondered if a safety on her emotional displays might be in her specifications perchance.

“Nevermind, that doesn’t matter.”

Before all of that, Nagato Yuki to me is an avid reader, one of little words, built with a small frame, but a completely dependable partner.

Of all the SOS Brigade members, Nagato possesses the broadest knowledge as well as the most active mind. With those in mind, I decided to ask the know-it-all further.

“How many times have we discovered this?”

My sudden question seemed anticipated by Nagato, as she calmly answered:

“Eight-thousand seven-hundred sixty-nine times. Frequency of detection increases with each iteration.”

“That is because of the sense of incoherence and familiarity, perhaps.”

Koizumi said this matter-of-factly.

“But even in those repeating cycles, even if we discovered our situation, we still failed to remedy the situation and restore time?”

“Correct,” Nagato replied.

No wonder Asahina-san broke down. She cries like this because she knows this fact. The moment she realizes once more that she has lost two weeks’ worth of body growth and memories due to the reset… And then to be devastated again after discovering that she is trapped in this rut.

I have already thought of this an uncountable number of times. Ever since I first met Haruhi in the spring, I find myself thinking like this whenever some crisis occurs because of her, whether that be now or in the past.

That’s not good.

No doubt this is the 8,769th time that I have thought of this within these two weeks.

This is too much…

Yet another fairytale.

The day after that was stargazing.

The locale was the roof of Nagato’s apartment building. The clumsy and bulky telescope came courtesy of Koizumi. He had it mounted on a tripod. We started at eight o’clock in the night.

The night sky looked quite bleak, as did Asahina-san’s face. Her facial expression was either dumbstruck or in disarray. My feelings were also a mess, so it really wasn’t the time to stare at the stars.

Koizumi extended the smile on his face as he set up the telescope.

“This was my hobby back when I was a kid. I was so touched when I first saw the moons of Jupiter.”

Nagato, as usual, stood still on the rooftop as a sentry.

I shifted my view to the night sky, but I could only see two or three stars. The air was too polluted in the city to see much. To say that “there is no sky” at this point would’ve been quite fitting. Come winter, when the atmosphere clears up, Orion would show itself.

The head of the telescope took aim at Earth’s neighbour. Haruhi, with her head poking about, said:

“No.”

“No what?”

“No Martian?”

I don’t hope for Martians to exist. Just think, a couple of octopus-looking monsters wriggling about as they discuss their Earth invasion plan. No matter how sweet their mouths are, I can’t use the term “interesting” to describe them.

“Why is that? They might be very friendly. Look, there’s nobody on the surface, so they must be the type to hide underground. This is the best proof that they’re afraid of startling us humans because they’re nice.”

Haruhi seemed to have underground dwellers in mind for her imaginary Martian. *Please, at least tell me what kind. Would it be Pellucidar? Or those from Mars Attacks? If it is a combination of the two, things could get ugly. Think simple; the simpler the better.*

“They might be doing prep work inside so that when the first Mars lander finally lands, they could come out and welcome humans in surprise! They might even say, ‘Welcome to Mars, neighbors! We welcome you!’”

That would be even scarier. If there’s a mishap, it would turn from a surprise to a fright. I have no idea who might be the first to land on Martian soil, but it might be best to give him an advance notice so he is emotionally prepared. Is it fine to send mail to NASA?

We took turns looking at the outlines of Mars and the Lunar craters as time went by. Just when I started wondering why we lost a man, I found Asahina-san with her eyes shut, head tilted as she hugged her knees, and leaned over the fence that prevents one from falling to an untimely death from the rooftop. *She must have had a sleepless night yesterday, so I’ll just let her be.*

Haruhi, apparently tired of staring at the unchanging night sky, remarked:

“Let’s hunt for UFOs! They must be aiming at Earth, who knows if there’s advanced scouts over the low orbits right as we speak.”

Haruhi happily turned the telescope about, but got tired of that quickly. She sat down next to Asahina-san, and fell into slumber while leaning on her narrow shoulder.

Koizumi whispered:

“Tired?”

“Kind of hard to imagine that she would be even more exhausted than us.”

Haruhi was in deep sleep. This gave me the urge to doodle all over her face. However, her sleepy visage wasn't one I wanted to deface. That woman is quite a looker if she doesn't say a word. It would be better if she and Nagato swapped minds. A totally expressionless Haruhi is already hard to comprehend, while a jittery and expressive Nagato is just beyond me.

With the night breeze gushing about, I looked at Asahina-san and Haruhi, sleeping next to each other. Those two made for decent competition as they were right now. Maybe some people might find Haruhi more outstanding. Hmm… Definitely.

"Just what does she want to do?"

I let this out with the air of a sigh.

"Could it be to have fun with some friends and have a great time?"

"Perhaps. Speaking of Suzumiya-san's friends, we would be them."

Koizumi gazed at the other end of the cosmos.

"If so, the most important thing is to find out just what will satisfy her. Should we fail, this cycle of time will never end. We can only accompany her until she finds her very wants that go unfulfilled and makes them happen. Fortunately and thankfully, memory adjustment exists, or we would suffer a nervous breakdown from this eventually."

Repeated for fifteen-thousand four-hundred ninety-eight times.

Is this for real? Could Nagato merely be scaring us? To put it plainly, this was beyond belief just from hearing it, but if the originator was Haruhi, it couldn't be denied. The unknown mysterious power of that woman always put us in deep water subconsciously. No matter if it were from her reckless nature or deep within her psyche, the same brand of troubles would always befall us. She was just that kind of person, the kind that will give you trouble no matter what.

I thought before that we who always accommodated the thoughtless Haruhi might be qualified to be nominated as goodwill ambassadors. Each member of the SOS Brigade has a better temper than the last. And to think that I happened to be a pivotal figure in deciding the fate of the world. This makes me suspect that the world was abnormal from the start.

To further iterate this point, the naïve notion that the world which we safeguard must be righteous is simply bullshit that is made and mass produced by humans under the guidance of ideologies and doctrines. There are plenty of bigots that blindly advertise this self-centered slander and force it upon others. I say to them that they should at least think of what the generations millennia later might have to conclude about them.

Just as I was knee deep in thought on such trivial matters, Koizumi opened his mouth without warning:

“Although we might not know Suzumiya-san’s inner desires, should we pry into her mind? For example, hug her from behind out of the blue or whisper ‘I LOVE YOU,’ or something along those lines.”

“Who would want to go on that suicide mission?”

“There is no more suitable individual than you.”

“I exercise veto power. PASS!”

“In that case, I shall attempt this.”

I obviously missed the expression that my face might have shown. I didn’t have a mirror on me at the moment. Although Koizumi seemed to have read my mind:

“I am joking. I lack the caliber to do so. If I really step up to the plate, it will only put Suzumiya-san into an unnecessary state of confusion.”

The shrieking laughter that came forth from his throat ended his words.

I fell into silence once more, staring at the bright moon that shone unabated from the melancholic night sky of summer.

The milky way that decorates the dark canvas blinked under the sun’s reflection, seemingly inviting me to play. To where? God knows.

I thought of all of this while staring at the shadow of a petrified Nagato, who faced the night sky.

Summer was not yet over, but summer vacation was coming to an end—although don’t be so sure, since I don’t know if summer break will really end or not. Please spare me. Honest.

We might very well return to August seventeenth. Just what to do in order to make Haruhi figure out just what this “thing that has not yet been done” is?

What could she have left out? I had a mountain of summer assignments that hadn’t been touched since I brought it home. That couldn’t be her concern, as she had it done way in advance.

Whatever should we do next?

“Let’s head to the practice grounds.”

Haruhi unveiled an aluminium bat, the very battered one that was taken from some baseball club one day. I never would've thought that she would keep the battered bat, which was better for bludgeoning than hitting balls.

The chief tossed her hair as she waved her bat at us with a beaming smile, and led us to the batting center down the way. I bet that high school league sent some strange vibes to her.

The specter of melancholy changed hands. It was now time for the blue, minute face of the SOS Brigade's Asahina-san to sink deeper into the blues. Honestly, this was slightly regrettable, for she must have been longing for her own world.

Back to the casually-paced Koizumi and Nagato, who were the spitting images of a smiley face and a stoic. *Would you all get serious and not act so carefree?!*

"Hu~"

I let a breath of air out of me, and my view became occupied by the bouncing black hair of Haruhi.

I have no idea who decided that protecting Haruhi would be my job, which started on the day of SOS's initiation. I will control my urge to vent my frustrations, since I can't pinpoint who the culprit is. That said, I shall make a declaration:

Do not praise me too highly for this job. I am but a layperson.

Although such a monologue only exposes my inner void.

Asahina-san was stymied. Koizumi had only smiled, while Nagato observed the surroundings silently.

I definitely must make Haruhi do something, somehow.

However, make her do what?

The answer lay in Haruhi, but not even Haruhi herself had any idea as to what the source of the problem was.

"Mikuru-chan doesn't need to swing the bat! You just practice bunting since you couldn't even get a hit no matter how hard you swing. Knock the ball down to get a ground ball. Ahh—don't hit it upward!"

The battlefield of the last baseball tournament still smelled of gunpowder. *Does she intend to compete next year?*

Haruhi hogged the 130km/h batting practice net. Bang! Bang! And there went the whistle. I felt a lot better seeing her so happy. That person is definitely a prodigy. Who knows, maybe she was

born with more mitochondria than anyone else; how else could she have gotten all that energy? It would've been great if she had spared some for charity work…

We kept going, since no one could press the "stop" button on Haruhi's caloric exhaustion plan.

We even headed to the local fireworks show. The fireworks were Shaku-dama shells launched from the shore. The three donned their yukata once more, but only Haruhi was really enjoying the rockets that went "boom, boom!" as they shot up in the air and "boom boom!" as they spread across the sky. Well, only she could be laughing on her belly as she pointed at the poor caricature impressions made by the fireworks. Haruhi just loves the excess of splendor. We can only see her genuine, untainted, and very childish smile at times like these, although I took my eyes away from her rather quickly, because if I kept staring at her, who knows what I would be thinking about. As for what I might think of, I am not sure of it myself. All of this, however, gives me a lesson: one must dress for the occasion.

A couple of days later, on a sudden whim, we joined in on the municipal Japanese Gobioid fishing competition and came back empty-handed. Our lures kept baiting some little fish that we'd never even seen, so we couldn't even submit their measurements—although Haruhi was absorbed in the joy of luring and reeling, not in catching. This was more of a reassuring and most moving blessing than having mistakenly fetch a Coelacanth out of nowhere, since I could enjoy the hand-made bento of the now-green Asahina-san, who ran at the sight of the sandworm bait.

This time around, Haruhi and I were baked black, creating a sharp contrast with the other two, who came with UV protection. Nagato seems to be an exception, as she just doesn't get a tan no matter what. Great! Since a crispy brown Nagato is something that would be totally out of this world.

That said, I knew very well that it was really no time to be enjoying myself.

Time went by like a speeding train on a track.

Haruhi was still filled with energy as I continued my loathing. The blue Asahina-san was now a shade of dark green, while Koizumi was beaming with his smile as if he were beyond the issue at hand. Only Nagato showed negligible difference.

In retrospect, these two weeks have been filled with thrills.

The deadline, however, is up. Today is the thirtieth of August, leaving only one day left for summer break. It will be over if we don't think of something within the next two days, but I have absolutely no clue as to what to try. The summer light, the cries of higurashi… All the ingredients of summer are sources of anxiety. The high school baseball league has produced a champion, too. Why oh why can't this last longer!?

At least, until Haruhi is totally satisfied.

Haruhi crossed out every single item on the list.

Yesterday night, we marched right into a graveyard during the heat of the night as we brought the activities of summer to a close with the "test of courage." There was no ghost fire, nor were there any phantoms. The only thing worth paying attention to was the terrified look of Asahina-san.

"With that, everything is done."

It was just past noon on the thirtieth of August, and we were in the all-too-familiar coffee shop right now.

Haruhi stared at the torn spot of the note as if she knew the whereabouts of the lost treasures of Tokugawa, with a deadpan expression that was like the pen strokes etched onto a page. She was both somewhat satisfied and unwilling to let go. I would be in her shoes, actually. There was only one more day of summer left.

Would summer actually end? At this point I was very skeptical about that; maybe I'm too much of a skeptic. Then again, you would become schizophrenic if you had spent a couple of months in this retarded organization lead by an overemotional chief. I sincerely hoped that she would become milder, preferably like when only Asahina-san is present with me, since that would make life… Nonono, I must stop this, since we might end up going in circles from that (all puns intended).

"Hmm- is that all—?"

Haruhi kept stabbing at the vanilla ice cream adrift on her cola. She was not being very decisive.

Nagato was silent and was quietly observing the floating lemon slice in her iced tea. Asahina-san's hands were clutching each other tightly on her knees; she was totally defeated, like a little puppy getting scolded. Koizumi was sipping his Vienna coffee as carefree as ever.

As for me, I had nothing to say as I hugged my chest, trying to figure out what to do.

"Never mind. We've done enough this summer. We've been to all sorts of places, worn yukata, and caught a good share of cicadas."

I happen to think that Haruhi was just patting herself on the back. *It's really not like that! As-is, we've done enough.* I felt from the bottom of my heart that Haruhi was not ready to slam the books on summer. No matter how she covered it, she was merely lying to herself. Inside Haruhi, in the deepest part of Haruhi, she yearned for more.

“As for today.”

Haruhi handed the bill to me—

“It ends now. Leave tomorrow free; it doesn’t matter if you want to stay at home and rest. Let us meet in the clubroom in two days.”

I felt very jittery when I saw Haruhi get off the chair and leave the table in style.

We couldn’t let Haruhi go home like this. There had to be a conclusion for once. If not, then the two week span discovered by Koizumi and guaranteed by Nagato would get to its fifteen thousand four hundred and ninety-nineth round.

But, what to do?

Haruhi’s form receded from me in slow motion.

Just now! It was too sudden, out of the blue, just unexpectedly—

It came.

This garbled feeling of “where have I seen this?” returned. This wave today came with spells of dizziness that were of an unimaginable magnitude compared to the last few times. It was a sense of déjà vu unlike any other. I knew what this was because I had lived through it thousands of times. August the thirtieth. One day left.

There must be something in Haruhi’s words that kicked me subconsciously. Just what is it, what is it, what is it~

“Are you all right?”

Somebody was saying something. Koizumi’s words should offer hints, as well. *Something that keeps getting delayed and has me worrying about…*

Haruhi was off her seat and ready to dash home like a hurricane. She couldn’t leave, or there would be no change to our situation. *Have I done anything in the past to twist the scenario?* Scene after scene ran past me like a slideshow. Everything we had done within the last two weeks…

And—things we had not done.

There was no time to think. I had to say something. How trivial matters not, *just say it!*

“My problems aren’t over!”

I must clarify: that's not shouting. Looking at it with a cool head later, that would be an instant burnt in and erased from the hippocampus. The surrounding customers and staff, as well as Haruhi, who was at the automatic door, turned their heads around and looked at me.

Words came pouring out of my mouth straight from my head.

"That's right, it's homework!"

Everyone in the shop was shocked once more with my loud declaration.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Haruhi stepped toward me as if looking at a maniac.

"Your issue? Homework?"

"I haven't done a thing for the summer assignment that we were given. If that doesn't get done, I can't let summer end."

"Are you nuts?"

She showed a look of utter distaste for idiots. Who cares, who cares?!

"Oy! Koizumi!"

"Yes, what is it?"

Koizumi seemed to have gotten a fright.

"How about you?"

"Not at all, since we have been running about through this summer. I have about half left."

"Let's do this together, then. Nagato as well, you wouldn't have it done!"

Before Nagato could answer, I extended my hand to Asahina-san, whose mouth was as wide open as a marionette doll in a puppet show.

"Asahina-san, why don't you tag along as well? Let's get the summer assignment behind us once and for all."

"Ehh…"

Asahina-san was a sophomore, so her work was different from ours, although that had no importance right now.

“But… But… Whe… Where to?”

“Come to my place. Bring your notes and your books and we can talk amongst ourselves while doing it. Nagato, Koizumi, let me copy whatever you two got done.”

Koizumi nods.

“Nagato, you in?”

“Yes.”

The half-beat kappa head nodded and stared at me.

“All right! See you all tomorrow! Let’s get started in the morning. We should be able to rush through it all in a day.”

Just as I held my fist high with an ego to match—

“Hold it right there!”

Haruhi, full of pride and with her hands stuck to her waist, came back to the side of the table.

“Don’t you decide this on your own! I am the chief! You better ask me if it is OK to do something! Kyon, any member making decisions on his own accord commits a serious offense of the brigade rules!”

With that out of her lungs, Haruhi glares at me and shrieked:

“Count me in!”

It was now the morning after.

I think I have it right. As I got up from my bed, I knew that we were out of the woods.

I knew this because I remembered that I had come back from the countryside when O-bon was over, and I could also recall memories of August from the pool and cicada hunts and so forth. Of all those memories to boot, the best of them would be yesterday’s date, clearly in my mind right now.

Yesterday was the thirty-first of August, and today was the first of September.

My freshest memories revealed to me that, on the last day of summer, I hosted the SOS Brigade crunch fest in this room. I recall that feeling of dazed fatigue well. It was exhausting enough having to copy down all the notes, so I can only dread the magnitude of the work had I been left

to my own devices. When I hit the bunks yesterday night, my brain was sure of one thing, that being that my HP, MP, and LIMIT bars were so low that just one swing would be enough to knock me out cold in my bed.

Yesterday, Haruhi took her pile of summer assignments to my room and shot a cold look at me, knee deep in work with my automatic pencil. Koizumi, Nagato, and Asahina-san then played with my little sister.

"Don't just plagiarize."

Haruhi continued as she was pressing the buttons on the controller and gaming with my sister:

"Paraphrase a bit, make sure you take extra steps with the equations as well. The teachers aren't all idiots. Math teacher Yoshizaki in particular likes to go after the gritty details. That said, Yoshizaki's solutions aren't exactly strokes of genius."

Having five people plus my sister in my room was cramped enough as it was, but adding my mom, who kept delivering lunches, desserts, and juice, only added fuel to my fire. Unlike most of us, who were close to getting carpal tunnel from all the wrist movements, Haruhi was having a great time. *Just look at her! The higher-ups must look upon peons with that same smile on their face. Who knows if she's in over her head.* Haruhi actually decided to offer input on Asahina-san's short essay. *If Asahina-san comes home with a "C," we can blame it squarely on Haruhi…*

As the trip down memory lane came to an end, I crawled my way out of bed.

Today was a brand new beginning in a brand new term, I guess.

This was the first time in my life that I had looked forward to the coming of the new term.

Class had ended. The principal's lecture was over, as was the short class meeting. Today was the first of September. I asked while in class, "What day is it?" with Taniguchi and Kunosaki giving me a look of pity. *I guess it really* is *the first of September.*

Because the cafeteria and the convenience store had yet to open, Haruhi headed off to the restaurant outside the schoolyard for her dining needs. The clubroom was occupied by me and Koizumi.

"Suzumiya-san is a maestro of the Renaissance. No doubt that she was remarkable from her infancy, so this summer assignment is not a burden of any sort to her. Such a remarkable personality would not fathom having to share the work with her friends, as it is pointless given her ability to single-handedly complete the tasks at hand."

Having heard Koizumi's explanation, I pulled the collapsible chair over to the windowpane. We were in the clubroom of the literature club. Today was orientation day, so we could've packed our bags and left, but I just felt like taking a detour in the clubroom, only to find Koizumi tagging along. The scariest and the most important thing is that Nagato was not with us. Although she didn't show it, the summer break must have been incredibly weary for her.

There was a change at hand over the cicada's territorial control. Higurashi were taking over the brown cicadas. Summer was over, that I was sure of. However—

"It's like a dream! We've been through the end of August for fifteen thousand somewhat odd times."

"It would not be baseless to think as such."

Koizumi started to shuffle the deck with his beaming smile.

"There is no common memory between us that existed within those fifteen thousand four hundred and ninety seven fortnights. They don't exist on the same time axis. Only we who have advanced in the fifteen thousand four hundred and ninety eight iterations have returned to the time stream."

That might be so, but I have received definite hints, those being the sense of familiarity that struck me so many times, especially that last wave that hit me. Maybe the gifts from "us" of the previous loops stuck in the moment. Would it be odd to say that's in the past? Whether it'd be before or in the beginning, time is just like tigerskin melted down to butter as it twirls round and round.

Well, it is thanks to the me in the thousands of repeats that the me of today can be back on track. If I don't think this way, then thousands upon thousands of summer days, courtesy of Haruhi, would've seemingly been wasted.

Not to mention the eight thousand seven hundred and sixty-nine mes who felt this "reset."

"Want to play poker?"

Koizumi started to hand out the cards like an amateur magician. It wouldn't hurt to entertain him.

"Fine, what will it be? Forget it if it's a money game."

"Then no money."

I only win big when winning doesn't matter. *Royal flush! That's a first.*

I swore in the back of my mind that if this day were to be repeated, I would be betting bucks for sure.

Prologue — Autumn

It was finally the second half of November, and fatigue had taken over my whole body after the end of that school festival.

Director Haruhi's cinematographic skills were chaotic, to say the least, yet the movie did quite well at the box office. I had thought she would indulge herself in her own success and cool down, but from start to finish, her pace never slackened.

Yet the school never stopped providing Haruhi with insane activities that might cause her to think or her subordinates to have to do things. Take the Student Council President election. I was really worried about what to do if Haruhi were to run for that position. I later discovered that Haruhi had the strange belief that the Student Council is the sworn enemy of all little club activities, and was not interested in infiltrating and destroying them from within, nor in taking over as the real master in the shadows.

Sounds more like she wants to fight this unseen force, if it even exists, head on.

It took great effort for them to pretend that such a suspicious club as the SOS Brigade never existed, or even just simply to ignore it. I mean, wasn't it a good thing that we each kept to our own affairs? Yet Haruhi is always full of spirit. It's just that I didn't know how she intended to do battle with this unknown enemy.

However, that sort of expectation was just a mere premonition, because the ones coming to us with flags and banners weren't assassins sent by the Student Council, but our neighbors bearing the flames of vengeance.

The Day of Sagittarius

The vast darkness of space stretched before my eyes.

It was like wearing goggles and getting lost within the darkness of the Horse-head Nebula: not even a single speck of starlight could be seen. To put it bluntly, it was like a crudely made background. At that moment, I started thinking it would have been a good idea to include some cinematics, but everything in this galaxy, including this space background, had a reason behind it, like logistics, technical constraints, or time.

"I can't see anything at all."

I began to grumble, since the screen had been showing nothing but darkness; I started wondering if the monitor had gone dead.

As I was wondering where in the galaxy I was wandering, a bright spot suddenly appeared on the dark screen and began to move forward. I decided to report to my superior.

"Hey, Haruhi, do you mind slowing down a bit? Your flagship's too fast."

Haruhi gave the following response to my report:

"Call me Supreme Commander, First Officer. The SOS Brigade possesses the highest military ranks; after all, we're the greatest ever."

As I pondered which of us were the Supreme Commander and First Officer……

"Commander Suzumiya, Intelligence Officer Nagato reports that the enemy fleet is moving suspiciously. How should we respond?"

Koizumi, the ass-kisser, reported the facts faithfully. Haruhi's response was,

"We'll just have to give them a surprise attack!"

A Haruhi-ist command indeed, but no one obeyed her. Or rather, no one dared to obey her, since if we faced the enemy head on, we would end up like the Takeda cavalry as they made their ill-fated triple assault on Tanegashima.

Asahina raised her hands and asked uncomfortably,

"Um…… what should I be doing……?"

"Mikuru-chan, you'll just get in the way, so just put your supply fleet over there, since I never expected anything from you. Kyon, you, Yuki and Koizumi-kun are in charge of taking on the enemy's front guard, while I give them a critical hit. A knockout critical hit, that is!"

Someone, please come and stop this girl!

I returned my gaze to the screen to reconfirm where my fleet was within the SOS Brigade Fleet. The 15,000 vessels of the were now chasing the in a straight line, the was escorting us at the side, while the ever reliable was now far ahead in search of enemy vessels. As for the which was in charge of supplies… thanks to Asahina's clumsy piloting skills, her fleet had been lost in space from the beginning.

"Ah~~!! W…where should I go?"

Asahina made a sound close to sobbing; she was helpless as usual.

As long as you're behind us, any direction will do. Just wander wherever you please. Although it's just a fleet on the screen, I do not wish for a fleet bearing your name to appear on the casualty list.

Suddenly, changes began to appear on the screen. The surveillance vessels sent out by the had now transmitted data to my fleet, which was linked to them. Besides indicating our fleet's vessels, the dark screen now also showed the enemy vessels that Nagato had detected.

"Haruhi, fall back," I said. "They've split up their fleet and are probably searching for your position. As a Commander, you ought to act like one and command behind the front lines."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

Haruhi's lips now pursed in irritation.

"Are you trying to leave me out of this battle? How mean! I want to fire deathrays and missiles along with everyone else as well!"

I gave the command for the to speed up slightly and said,

"Haruhi, listen, once your fleet is hit, we're finished. Just look, the enemy's vessels in front are all just pawns, while their flagship is probably hiding behind giving commands. You don't see people sending their Kings out to the battlefield in chess, do you? Besides, we've only just begun the battle."

"Erm… you may be right…"

Haruhi looked a bit embarrassed and stared at me like a cat begging for food.

"Then, I'll let you guys handle the situation for now. When you come into contact with any enemy vessels, just fire away. There's no way we can lose to those bastards, absolutely no way. If we lose, the SOS Brigade's reputation will be in tatters. Besides, I just can't stand them being above me!"

“Commander. Intelligence Officer Nagato’s has engaged the enemy and gone to battle stations. I too wish for Your Excellency to command us all from the back.”

Koizumi sounded serious, but it’s hard to take this guy seriously when he’s smiling so cheerfully.

Haruhi was now in seventh heaven thanks to Koizumi’s ass-kissing. She crossed her arms and sat on the commander’s seat, showing the expression of a high-ranking rookie commander who is only there because of her birthright and not her commanding ability.

“Since Advising Officer Koizumi says so, I’ll take his advice. Everyone, go out and kill them all! Show those Computer Study Group people the consequences of trying to be too clever. Our battle objective is total annihilation! Grind them all into stardust!”

There was nothing wrong with her aim in achieving total victory, but it’s best not to forget that they were the ones who initiated this battle, so they probably had some cards up their sleeves.

In my opinion, the SOS Brigade’s chances of victory were slimmer than the Japanese navy’s were at Leyte Gulf. There are no ifs in history; even though we were now evenly matched in the number of fleets, we would still lose. So it would probably be best to surrender right away.

“Sigh, don’t think we can do that either.”

I rolled up my sleeves and reconfirmed the enemy intelligence on my screen. As expected from Nagato, all the enemy fleets, save the commander’s fleet, had now been located. The responsibility of leading our fleet to victory now rested on me (having involuntarily been given the ridiculously exaggerated title of First Officer) using my wits and fingers.

What strategy should we use?

“First of all…… here!”

I stared into the LCD monitor of my notebook PC, and tried to speculate where Commander Haruhi’s intentions would lead us.

But before getting into that, I’d better explain our current situation to everyone first. It’s always good to sort out one’s thoughts, in order to make the correct decision. Yes, let’s start from there.

It all began a week ago.

One autumn day after school.

SOS

It was days after the school festival had ended, and the school had returned to its usual peaceful mood.

The sentence above was just a cliché, since, to put it bluntly, we'd merely returned to where we were before the school festival. Despite this, I wasn't the only one who was grateful things had ended so peacefully.

Since the others hadn't confessed to me fully, I had no idea what they were really thinking, except that Koizumi's trademark smile now carried more relief than usual, while Nagato's blank expression was a guarantee for a job well done.

For some time, especially recently, I have treated the intense reading of this bookworm as a sign that peace has returned. If Nagato had begun doing weird stuff, or started showing a sense of helplessness, then I'd have had to start writing my will and memoirs. I don't suppose the word "unexpected" exists in Nagato's vocabulary. So when I see her sitting in the corner of the Literature Room reading her foreign science fiction novels, I can say with confidence that it is a sure sign that horrible nightmares won't be coming here.

On the other hand, the pretty fake maid continued to serve tea meaninglessly in her usual costume. It's hard to believe she's from the future, as she never seems to know anything about the past. With a serious look, she began brewing some warm Japanese tea. I have no idea where Asahina learned all this, but she seems to know the correct temperature for brewing all sorts of tea leaves. And she wasn't brewing with the hot water from the electric flask, but with tap water boiled with a kettle.

She held a thermometer in one hand, opened the kettle lid with her other hand and stuck the thermometer into the kettle, studying it intently. I just couldn't see her as someone from the future. Something was just not right. Come to think of it, *nothing* was right with the headquarters of the SOS Brigade, because everything in it was so weird. The only thing that was normal was my own consciousness telling me that I really do exist. Man, I feel like René Descartes right now.

This club room once belonged to the Literature Club, but for some time now it had been the lair for Suzumiya Haruhi and her henchmen. I'm probably an important figure myself, if I can remain sane in such a warped dimension. Now that I think about it, the other members in this brigade (besides me) are each backed by a mysterious force, while Haruhi, the commander herself, is full of mysteries. I'm the only one here with an objective mind, and I get frustrated every time I realize that.

The lunatic four vs. the objective one—no matter how you look at it, the ratio's just not right. I wish someone would come and share my mental burden with me, just one person would do. After all, it's not like I have a habit of making some witty remarks every now and then. Sometimes I'd like to stay quiet for once. Why does that responsibility always have to fall on my shoulders? I feel like singing a melancholic tune to vent my frustration on the unfairness of this world. But I don't want to drag Taniguchi and Kunikida into this. It's not that I pity them, but they're just not up to it. I don't think they have the suitable vocabulary and reflexes to resist

Haruhi… I should say they're a bit mental like Tsuruya-san. Damn it! Is this world run by maniacs?

"Hmm."

I crossed my arms and mumbled as if in deep thought. I wasn't troubled with what move I should make next in my Go game with Koizumi. There was no difficulty at all in pushing Koizumi's black pieces to the brink of defeat. If I were to be compared with a board game fanatic like Koizumi, who is honestly quite bad at all of them, then I'd truly be troubled. But that's not what I was troubled about. What I was troubled with was whether this world is normal or not. Because according to my hypothesis, in a mad world, only the insane can live their lives normally; even the most mentally sane would be driven mad sooner or later. I think I should commend myself for being able to exist peacefully as a normal high school student in this whirlpool that is the SOS Brigade, where normal rules don't apply. I ought to be praised just for this alone.

"Allow me to give you some words of praise, then."

Koizumi managed to elegantly place his piece down on the Go board and gracefully took one of my white pieces away. He may have made his move, but from his current situation, it was only a matter of time before he found himself in a quagmire.

"Thanks, but no thanks."

I replied, and placed my hands into the container carrying the Go pieces. Amidst the clattering noise of the pieces being mixed around, Koizumi gave a look of sincerity in praising me. This made me even more irritated.

"Somehow, I don't feel happy at all being praised by a guy like you. Instead, I'm rather disturbed at what you might be plotting. Let me make this clear: I'm not one of your pawns. If you think I'm going to obediently follow your script, then you're sadly mistaken."

"When you say 'you,' to whom are you referring? I'm innocent, really. This is all just because you and Suzumiya-san keep coming up with strange events. My presence alone is the best evidence for that."

If Koizumi hadn't transferred over, then Haruhi wouldn't have chosen him to join the SOS Brigade. Her interest in "Koizumi Itsuki" had nothing to do with his gender, personality, behavior or appearance, but simply the fact that he was a transfer student, and nothing else. Serves him right. Of all the times to transfer, he had to transfer right after that weird girl had enrolled. Or perhaps he transferred on purpose just so he could approach Haruhi? If he is the esper wonderboy that Haruhi has been looking for all her life, then he should be avoiding her as though she's a highly radioactive substance, randomly giving off Cherenkov radiation.

"That was in the past."

Koizumi glanced at the Go piece in his hand.

“Indeed, the original plan was to quietly observe her from behind the scenes without her knowing. I was petrified with terror when Suzumiya-san came straight to my class looking for me, then brought me to this room after school that day. And when she announced that the purpose of the club is to look for aliens, time travelers, and espers and play with them, what else could I do besides smile?”

Koizumi continued nostalgically,

“But things are different now. I may have been a mysterious transfer student back then, but I’ve lost that attribute already. I’m sure Suzumiya-san thinks so as well.”

“So what? In my eyes, you’re still pretty mysterious.”

Koizumi looked around the room like a cat that loves narrow spaces: he first fixed his gaze for a while on Nagato who was busy reading, then on Asahina, who was paying close attention to the kettle. Then his gaze returned to its original spot.

Haruhi wasn’t in, since she had cleaning duty that day, or Koizumi and I wouldn’t have been chatting away in a relaxed manner.

In a club room with the commander absent, Koizumi smiled gently like an experienced vet about to cure a wounded bird and said,

“Right now, I, Nagato-san, Asahina-san, and you have now become the wonderful members of the SOS Brigade, nothing more, nothing less. I’m sure Suzumiya-san must be thinking the same way as well.”

“May I ask what’s your definition of ‘nothing more, nothing less’? Is there some meaning to that?”

“Of course there is a meaning. Paranormal existences like aliens and dimensional travelers are considered more than just members, while everyone else is less significant than us members.”

Then Taniguchi, Kunikida, Tsuruya-san and my sister are considered less significant than members? I’m not trying to plead for them, but the thought of them being worth less than I am sure is discomforting.

“It’s simple, really. If their existence meant a lot to Suzumiya-san, then they would already be members by now and would be here in this room as we speak. But the fact that they’re not means that they aren’t important in the eyes of Suzumiya-san.

“They only mean as much to her as the ordinary passerby. Really, after talking so much, we still couldn’t avoid using the consequential theory.”

“Then what about dimensional travelers? Have they not arrived yet?”

“Judging from the results, they probably don’t exist. If they did, then they would be summoned to this room by chance or by fate.”

“They’d better not come. I don’t want to be sucked into an alternate dimension.”

As I placed my white piece down and devoured Koizumi’s pieces, a tea cup was being placed by the Go board with the victor decided.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Please enjoy your tea.”

Smiling like a gentle coach who had managed to lead her rag-tag school baseball team to the regional championships, Asahina stood by the table and said,

“I bought a new brand of tea leaves called ‘Karigane.’ It’s easy to brew, but it’s really expensive.”

Asahina-san, you shouldn’t be paying for those tea leaves with your own money; make sure you remember to ask Haruhi to reimburse your expenses. There’s really no need to be so picky over what tea leaves to brew with because, as long as it’s made by the hands of Asahina, even a cup of tap water can taste better than Evian’s pure mineral water for me.

“Hee hee, then please try out the tea.”

Asahina had cosplayed as a maid for so long that she was getting good at it. She placed another cup by Koizumi’s side, then gracefully carried the tray over and placed a cup by Nagato’s side.

“……”

As always, Nagato had nothing to say, but for Asahina, this silence was just as good as sincere gratitude. As of now, I’ve yet to see the SOS Brigade’s alien and time traveler having a cheerful conversation… No, wait, I’ve never seen Nagato ever having a cheerful conversation with anyone. Forget it, maybe this is a good thing. If Nagato were to suddenly become talkative, I think I’d be scared silly. Besides, if she became like Haruhi, in whose case it’s better for her to shut up, then it’d really be a pity.

It’s best for silent people to remain silent.

Playing board games and drinking tea idyllically like this was enough to make one forget that evil actually exists in this world. Yet this brief moment of peace didn’t last for long. In fear of being forgotten, trouble always makes a periodic visit.

A knock echoed through the door. I lifted my head and watched that bruised, inexpensive door and prepared myself mentally. Why was I preparing myself mentally you say? Because right now the only ones in the club room are the four of us minus Haruhi, and if Haruhi ever knocks,

then I'd have to walk to the farthest corner of the room and laugh heartily. In other words, the one knocking on the door is neither Haruhi nor anyone else from the SOS Brigade, but someone else entirely. Whoever it was, I had no idea, but they must have a reason for visiting. This has always been true, as seen with Kimidori-san's visit that day.

"Coming."

Asahina rushed with little steps in her slippers to answer the door. How professional, it's as though even she believes herself to be a maid. That's good… now what the hell was I talking about?

"Huh?"

Asahina opened the door and blinked her eyes as if seeing a surprise visitor.

"Please enter…… um… do you want to enter?"

Asahina walked two steps backwards, and for some reason shielded her breasts with her arms.

"No thanks, I only need to say something standing here."

The visitor's response sounded a bit anxious. He stuck his head through the open door and looked around the room.

"Oh, your commander isn't here……"

Concealing his anxiety within his speech is none other than the leader of the room next to ours, the president of the Computer Study Group.

Since no one else said anything, I ended up having to handle the negotiations. Asahina stood there looking awestruck, Koizumi only sat there and smiled at the president, while Nagato simply continued reading her book.

"How may we help you?"

Since he was a senpai, it was only natural to be polite to him. I walked out and stood in front of Asahina. Hmm? Behind the Computer Group president, who hadn't even stepped over the door line, stood a bunch of male students that seemed to be his lifeless minions. What's this? It's still a bit too early to exact revenge.

When the president noticed it was me coming out, he breathed a sigh of relief and smiled lightly, then straightened his back and said,

"Here, take this."

I didn't know what he was up to, suddenly handing me a single CD case. Regardless of whether I would accept it or not, there was no reason the Computer Study Group would give things to us for free, so naturally I looked at them suspiciously.

"No, no, there's nothing suspicious about it." The president said. "It's game software, an original game created by our study group. We distributed it during the school festival, don't you remember?"

Sorry, I don't think I had that much free time then. The only things I could remember from the school festival were the band music concerts and Asahina's noodle stall waitress costume.

"I see……"

The Computer Group president didn't look dejected, but his brows clearly drooped as he mumbled, "It was because we were in a crap location……"

If you came here to have a chat, then you can leave now before Haruhi returns and turns this into a big ruckus.

"Of course I came here for a reason, but it's best to keep things simple. Then, here I go!"

The president kept sweating, and kept on holding back when he was about to say something; the lifeless minions behind also nodded their head with a determined expression. Hurry up and say what you want to say.

"Let's have a showdown with this game!"

The president said in a different tone and once again handed the CD box to me.

Why do we want to have a match with the Computer Study Group with this game? If you're short on players, then my best advice is to try your luck with other clubs.

"This isn't a game!"

Looks like the president wants to struggle on.

"This is a showdown! With stakes involved!"

Then go find Koizumi, I'm sure he'll be glad to play with you till sunset.

"No! We want to have a showdown with you!"

I beg you, please stop using the word "showdown." It's not like you don't know how things get into Haruhi's ears very quickly, if that hyper-confident, self-centered girl ever hears you……

"WHOOOAAA!!!"

“URRRGGGHHH!!!”

After a series of weird lines, the president disappeared from my vision as he was kicked off to the side.

“Whoa!?” “President!” “Are you all right?”

A few seconds later, the lifeless minions began to yell in panic and ran to the side of the president, who was now lying in the corridor, while I moved my gaze slowly.

“Who the hell are you guys!?”

Looking at the members of the Computer Study Group with her glittering pupils and opening her beautiful lips was none other than Suzumiya Haruhi.

After what was basically a sneak attack and a flying kick on the president, she landed perfectly on the ground, looking extremely pleased with herself.

Haruhi proudly flicked her hair by her ears and said,

“So, the Evil Organization has come. You must be the secret group that sees the SOS Brigade as their sworn enemy. I won’t let you get away with it! Because we bear the responsibility of bringing light to the darkness and ridding the world of all evil! Small fry will always be small fry, so hurry up and disappear after making your scene!”

The president, who seemed to have bumped his head when he fell, moaned in pain, while his members sat by him looking worried. So I think I was the only one who heard Haruhi’s edict.

“Haruhi, it’s not that I’m criticizing you……”

Ever since I entered high school, I’ve forgotten how many times I had tried to hold Haruhi back.

“You should at least hear what he has to say before beating him up. Well, thanks to you, I don’t even know why he came here. All I know is that he wants to have a showdown with us on some computer game……”

“Kyon! When someone declares a showdown, then it’s decided. This is a declaration of war. Anything else the loser says are excuses! Who cares about what they say even before we beat them!”

Like a hunter going to check on her prey, Haruhi walked towards the president and said in a disrespectful manner,

“Oh, it’s you from next door. What’s he doing here anyway?”

That's why I said you needed to give him a chance to explain himself. You were the one who sent him flying before he could say anything.

"That's because," Haruhi stuck out her lips, "I thought it was the Student Council coming to drive us from our club room. It's probably about time they came as well. Really, why do people come to us looking for trouble all the time?"

"Even if it were the Student Council, there's no need to send people flying."

As I was trying hard to talk Haruhi out of it……

"Come to think of it, we still haven't held that other activity……"

Koizumi suddenly appeared outside in the corridor and reminded Haruhi about something in deep thought. Must you really be such a busybody?

"Ugh…… SOS Brigade…… you really are shameful……"

After moaning for a long time, the president finally managed to stand up, aided by his members carrying him,

"A, anyway, let's have a showdown. I know we don't get along well, so I've prepared a written statement. Once you read it, you'll know what the showdown is about."

One of the members took out a stack of photocopied paper and CD boxes, and walked towards us in fear, as though trying to feed the wild lions with raw meat.

"Thanks."

Koizumi smiled and received the papers and CDs.

"We've received the game software, but is there an instruction manual?"

A second member carried another stack of papers and handed it to Koizumi, then said quietly,

"President, we've completed our task. Let us return to our club room."

"Yeah, let's go back."

He nodded weakly.

"Then, please excuse us……"

After explaining just part of the events, the president prepared to make his escape, but Haruhi grabbed him by his neck and prevented his getaway.

“Explain everything properly before you leave! Don’t think you can shut me up with a stupid written statement! Now say it in a language that even this idiot Kyon here can understand!”

Who are you calling an idiot!?

As a result, the poor Computer Group president got dragged back into the Literature Club room. Before the other Computer Group members could rescue their president, the door was slammed shut.

Unlike Haruhi who is active every month of the year, once the school festival finished, everyone else in school reverted back to their normal school lives. However, the Computer Study Group seemed to be unsatisfied with this as well and wanted to make it big. Yet right now their president was sitting here alone on the steel chair looking terrified, looking like a white mage who got separated from his party in a dungeon, and is surrounded by a group of blood-thirsty vampires with his MP all used up. He didn’t even have the mood to enjoy the tea Asahina brewed as Haruhi began her interrogation on him.

Allow me to briefly list out the points from the interrogation.

The Computer Study Group president made the following demands:

1. Showdown with the Computer Group using the computer game they created.
2. If we win, then the computer sitting on the SOS Brigade’s desk will have to be returned to its original spot.
3. After all, such an advanced multi-purpose computer is wasted on the SOS Brigade. The computer
should remain in the Computer Group’s room in order to maximize its potential. So we demand that
it be returned at once.
4. When the computer was taken away from us, it has caused a great deal of pain for the president and his members, it’s best to leave this aside. We want to forget it so badly, let’s pretend it never happened.
5. Due to the reasons above, you must accept our challenge…… Let us battle!

The stack of written statements that Koizumi handed to me contained some incomprehensible contents which were more or less summarized above. Basically it was a complaint and challenge letter combined into one, but I only managed to read the tidy printed lines in the first page before Haruhi decided to just hear it first hand from the president. What he was trying to say was really simple.

“If you have no use for the computer, then give it back to us.”

The president said. Haruhi replied,

“Of course we’re using it. All the time. We only just used it to edit the movie we made a while ago.”

To be precise, I was the only one that ever used it.

“We even made a website.”

I also made that myself. Besides surfing the internet to kill time and drawing some symbolic emblem that was no different from a scribble, Haruhi hardly ever used the computer.

“All your website ever has after six months is a front page! And you haven’t updated it in months!”

The president retorted furiously. So he’s the one who regularly visits that website and increases the visitor number count. I see, this would explain why he got trapped inside a giant cave cricket once. He really is concerned at how much we use the computer.

“But when I asked you guys for a computer, you said OK. Kyon, you remember as well right?”

Did I remember? Yes, I can remember clearly Asahina kneeling on the floor sobbing, poor girl. But I didn’t pay much attention at all to what the president said then. Even if he did agree, he was mentally devastated then, so that transaction probably doesn’t count.

“Objection! I’m now making a serious protestation!”

Looks like the president is serious this time. He crossed his arms and shut his mouth, with the determined look of a warrior prepared to die on the battlefield. I thought he has given up after half a year already, but his inner flame was still burning brightly.

“Hmm……” Haruhi smiled and nodded. “All right, since you so want to have a showdown with us, then I’ll accept your challenge. We’re betting on the computer right? What are you placing your stakes on?”

“The computer over there, of course, what else would it be? If we lose, then that computer stays with you.”

“That computer already belongs to us. There’s not much fun in reclaiming what’s already ours, find something else to bet on!”

For some reason I was moved by Haruhi’s words, she can always find a way to turn any illegally obtained object into her legal possession. Does she intend to become a professional thief?

However, the president didn’t get angry. Instead, he gave a stiff smile,

“All right. If you win, then we’ll give you a new…… right, we’ll give you four computers. They’re all notebooks, if you’re fine with them……”

How brave of you to raise the stakes. Haruhi never expected he would say that,

“Really? Are you sure?”

She jumped off from the commander’s desk and stared at the president’s face.

“Are you serious about this? If you don’t keep your word, I won’t forgive you!”

“You have my word, I’ll even sign a declaration of intent.”

Seeing the defiant look on the president, I suddenly understood a bit where his confidence came from.

For some time Nagato had been staring at the CD in her hand. What kind of game it contained, I did not know, but one thing was for sure, the Computer Group had poured all their knowledge into making this game. Leaving aside the question of whether the Computer Group are all expert gamers, they probably think they can crush the amateur SOS Brigade. I think so as well. In a real competition, no matter what game it was, it’s unlikely we would win. We only won that baseball game thanks to Nagato’s magic bat, and not because of our abilities.

However, there’s obviously someone in our brigade that just doesn’t get it.

“You don’t have any girls in your club, do you?”

Haruhi asked such a meaningless question all of a sudden.

“We don’t, so what?” The president answered.

“Don’t you want any female members?”

“……N…no.”

The president tried his best to keep composed, while Haruhi smiled evilly like an old lecher,

“If you win, then I’ll reward you with this girl.”

She pointed at Nagato’s face.

“I bet you want a girl in your club, don’t you? Yuki’s very useful, she has a great memory, and behaves herself more than any one of us here.”

You moron! How can you make such a proposal? They offered four computers, while we only offered a person, isn’t that too little? Besides, there’s no way the four computers can match Nagato, though I don’t think you know that yet.

“……”

Nagato sure looked calm even though she was being used as a betting stake. Without moving, she turned her gaze towards me, past Haruhi and landed on the president's face.

"Huh…… b…but……"

"What now? You telling me you want to pick Mikuru-chan instead? Or maybe you think your four computers aren't enough to buy Nagato-san? Very well, let's have a secondary prize. If we win, you'll have to change your club name to 'SOS Brigade North High Second Branch'."

"Eh…… wha…… I……"

Asahina stuttered at hearing Haruhi's words, and instantly froze on the spot.

"You can go be their trophy if we lose."

I indignantly turned to Haruhi,

"Stop treating Nagato and Asahina-san as though they're objects! Why can't you bet on yourself? There's a limit to obnoxiousness!"

"What are you talking about? The commander is the SOS Brigade's holiest and most symbolic existence and cannot be desecrated! The commander represents the very nature of the SOS Brigade! Besides those that I've chosen, I don't intend to step down from this position!"

Are you saying you're going to continue your rule over this realm even after you graduate?

"Besides, no one can make an equivalent trade for me! Not even if they search the corners of the earth!"

Haruhi unreasonably dodged my attacks, pointing first at the silent Nagato and the awestruck Asahina as she walked towards the president.

"Now choose! Which one do you want?"

As she said that, she glanced towards me and added,

"If in the end you still want to choose me…… then all right, you can pick me as well!"

As expected from the president, who wasn't fooled at all by Haruhi's foolish taunts. I followed his line of vision and noticed him glancing at Nagato many times. This I could understand.

Carrying the crucifiable crime of groping Asahina, the ex-convict naturally didn't feel qualified to pick the victim of his crime. On the other hand, Taniguchi told me that Nagato actually has a lot of secret admirers, maybe this sort of silent bookish girl is the president's type? The fact that

he didn't dare raise his head in front of Asahina was another indication. And he was still being careful to maintain his image, not wanting to openly declare "I want a girl in my club." So it's natural that he picked Nagato.

What about Haruhi, you say? Ha. Once her eccentric reputation has spread to the whole school, the only guys who would pick her are either natural born masochists, or are just weird themselves. Of course, they can never match Haruhi in terms of weirdness, so I can breathe a sigh of relief at that.

And so, the stage for the battle had been set.

The president led his minions out of the Literature Club room and quickly returned. This time they carried, if I remember correctly, four notebook computers. At first I thought, how generous of them to offer us the prize in advance. It was only then I realized that the game requires five computers in order to play. Then, not knowing whether they were members of the Computer Group or telecommunication technicians, they swiftly installed LAN cables for Haruhi's desktop PC and the remaining four notebook PCs, and then installed the gaming software that they had developed onto the machines. From their conversations, I could guess that this was a 5 vs 5 space battle simulator. Basically, the SOS Brigade would have five computers, the Computer Group would also have five computers, and both would do battle over the same server. It's just that we'll be in our club room while they'll be in theirs.

Of course, the server itself is placed in their room. Hmm, I see.

"One week of practice for you should be enough?"

The president looked pleased with the swift efficiency of his members.

"The battle will commence one week from now at 4 pm. Try and do some practice before then. It wouldn't be much fun if our opponents were too weak."

He's talking as though he's going to win this. He sounds just like Haruhi in this aspect. And just the thought of getting something new is enough to make Haruhi grin from ear to ear.

"Hmm, I was thinking about getting some new notebook computers as well. Everyone should have one, since investment in equipment is one of the key factors in motivating employees."

I'm not the sort that can be motivated by a mere notebook computer. But since you're giving it to me for free, I might as well accept it.

I drank the tea that has now gone cold and noticed Nagato's expression. She stood alongside Asahina against the wall, looking at the Computer Group making their installations with her blank face. There was no change in her emotions, looking peaceful as usual.

I don't think they would place a virus inside their own game, but there's no guarantee that they wouldn't. If they did, Nagato would do something about it. As long as she's around, then I can relax. No matter what tricks the Computer Group tries to pull, there's no way they can cheat Nagato.

As I played with my empty teacup, Asahina rushed to my side and said,

"Kyon-kun…… what…… what should I be doing? I… I know nothing about machines……"

Her troubled eyes are fixed on the ever increasing number of wires. Well there's really no need to worry much.

"It's only a game, just have fun and play along."

I comforted her. To be honest, I meant what I said. If the stakes for this showdown were really Nagato and Asahina, then I would fight with all my might without hesitation. As for whether Haruhi returns the computer that she obtained through trickery, that's a completely different issue altogether. For me, the conditions set out by the Computer Group were of low risk and high return. That was the difference between the obstacles and confidence of both teams.

"This is a showdown where we have nothing to lose and everything to gain. That's why Haruhi accepted it so quickly."

I said convincingly, to ease the anxiety of Asahina, I even smiled deliberately.

"But Suzumiya-san…… she seems very serious about it…"

Once the Computer Group members had finished their installation, Haruhi grabbed Koizumi, who was holding a stack of papers which seemed to be the game's instruction manual, and went to her commander's desk, wanting to try the game right away as she clutched the mouse.

For some reason, as they left the club room, the other members besides the president all looked rather pleased, or should I say rather smug, as though they had accomplished some great achievement.

After that, we tested each of the computers. This testing lasting till sunset, and then we decided to call it a day.

As the five of us walked down the slope from school, I had a conversation with Koizumi. I waited till we were yards behind the three girls, then I said to him,

"A while ago, I decided to just forever seal away a certain sentence from my vocabulary."

"Really? What was it?"

“Take a guess.”

Koizumi smiled ironically, and pretended to do some thinking,

“From your perspective, there aren’t a lot of words that you would want to seal away. It can be the speechless expression ‘……’, or ‘That’s enough!’ These are the most appropriate answers, aren’t they?”

I kept quiet as Koizumi smiled and answered my question.

“All right, you win.”

I gave him a shrug of my shoulders and raised my hands as a reward for correctly guessing my question. Koizumi pretentiously waved his hands and said,

“I truly understand how you feel right now.”

Like hell you would understand.

“No no, you’re trying to avoid getting into the same repetitive mood all the time. If you do the same stuff all the time, then even if no one else has noticed, over time you’ll get tired of it as well. It’s just like not wanting to play a game that’s been played thousands of times so that you’ve become bored of it. You’re actually worried what would happen if you become tired of it all. This is the same with Suzumiya-san. The difference is that her actions are based on her thoughts, while your thoughts are limited by what she does. So, who is the one more relaxed here?”

What are you analyzing all this like a psychiatrist for? The hole in my heart isn’t easily filled by your instantly made-up theories, you know. In fact, it ought to be you who should be examining your actions. As Haruhi’s yes-man, you’re the least qualified to analyze me.

“A yes-man I may be, but I’m staying here out of my own will. Have you forgotten? Though Nagato-san, Asahina-san and I represent different factions and ideals, we’re all gathered here for more or less the same reasons. I don’t think you need reminding, my primary mission is actually to observe Suzumiya-san.”

That’s why I’m feeling depressed. Being dragged into the SOS Brigade for no reason, and then strangely following her every whim without question? Give me a break! What sort of conspiracy is this?

“How can I possibly know?”

Koizumi’s playful eyes now looked into me.

“Actually, it’s not just Suzumiya-san. Even you have become our observation target. From now on, no matter what you and Suzumiya-san do, I will always take on the challenge with

trepidation, and treat it as a widening of my vision of this world. I should be thankful to you just for this point alone. I'm not joking, I'm really grateful for you two."

You're not the one suffering, of course you're in the mood to be grateful.

Since the end of the school festival, my mind's gotten a bit clearer. The mountain winds now carry a bit of autumn chill. I just can't like this season. Compared with the ever colder weather as the days pass by, Haruhi's tyranny feels so much better.

It was getting dark. The three girls slowly walked ahead of us, Haruhi was chatting away, Asahina nodded in agreement with her from time to time, while Nagato shut off all other mechanical functions besides walking. Nagato's bag was bulging, as it contained the notebook computer that had been allocated to her. When I asked her what she was taking that home for, Nagato placed the game CD-ROM into her bag and said, "Analysis." Looking at her silhouette, I suddenly thought of something.

"Koizumi, I have a suggestion."

"How rare. I'm all ears."

Just to be safe, I lowered my voice.

"Can we not cheat during our showdown with the Computer Group?"

"Your definition of cheating is……?"

Koizumi also lowered his voice and asked.

"The stuff Nagato used during the baseball tournament."

Don't tell me you've forgotten.

"Let me make this clear, if you have any powers that allow you to manipulate video games in our favor, don't use them. And besides supernatural powers, don't use any other methods that would constitute as cheating as well!"

Koizumi smiled lightly and gave me an inquiring look,

"Are you up to something? You're saying it doesn't matter if we lose, right?"

"Yes."

This I admit.

“Just this time, don’t use any powers or techniques related to aliens, future time travelers or espers to cheat. I think it’s best to face the showdown properly and accept whatever outcome comes our way.”

“And your reason for doing that……?”

“Even if we do lose, we’ll only lose the computer that we stole from them. Besides, it’s just being returned to its rightful owner. It’s not that much of a big deal for us.”

Before returning the computer, I’d better store Asahina’s secret photo album somewhere safe first.

“What I wanted to know was not about whether the computer gets returned or not.”

Koizumi said in an intrigued tone,

“You should know Suzumiya-san’s not the sort that likes losing. If we keep showing signs of losing during the showdown, she might get frustrated and create a Sealed Dimension. Are you really okay with that?”

“I don’t care.”

I looked at Haruhi’s back.

“It’s about time that girl learns to grow up. She can’t have everything her way. Besides, it wasn’t her who started this fight this time, so I don’t think she would be too serious about the outcome.”

I’d better tell Nagato to seal her ESP powers as well tomorrow. Wonder if I should tell Asahina as well? Though for someone who admits that she’s no good with machines, it’s hard to imagine what sort of special powers or classified stuff she would use to win this space battle. But I think I’ll talk to her just to be safe.

Koizumi giggled quietly, just what is he doing? He sounds gross.

“No, I wasn’t laughing at you. It’s just that I’m envious of you.”

What are you envious of me for?

“I’m envious of the deep level of trust between you and Suzumiya-san.”

What are you talking about? I heard you but I don’t get what you mean.

“Are you playing dumb? Sorry, perhaps you really don’t realize it. Suzumiya-san always seems to count on you a lot, while you place a great deal of trust in her as well.”

Who are you to tell me who I place my trust in?

“Let’s assume that we really do lose the showdown next week. Yet you believe Suzumiya-san won’t create a Sealed Dimension as a result. This shows how much you trust her. Similarly, Suzumiya-san believes as long as you’re around, she can win this showdown. This is also a level of trust. She placed her stakes on herself and her own members, because she genuinely believes she won’t lose. You two may not admit it openly, but it’s obvious that you two have developed a trustful partnership.”

I fell into a well of silence. Why did I not answer him back for so long? Was it because Koizumi’s speculation had hit the bullseye in my heart? I’ll let the experts deal with whether I trust her or not, but I really do believe Haruhi’s mental state won’t be going out of control all the time now. Just look at the events of the past six months. Many things have happened from the founding of the SOS Brigade to the making of the movie, and many memories were created. I myself have grown a lot since then, I’m sure the same can be said of Haruhi. Otherwise she would be the biggest idiot in the world without any hope of salvation.

“It’s worth a try.”

My tongue finally moved to find something to say.

“If we really lose to the Computer Group, and Haruhi creates a weird and sinister grey world as a result, then I really don’t care about you guys anymore. This time I might as well join her in destroying this world.”

Koizumi smiled casually and said a matter-of-factly,

“That’s what I meant by you guys trusting each other. Now do you understand why I’m envious of you?”

I didn’t answer him, paying attention only to my footsteps. Koizumi wanted to add something, but realizing I wasn’t in the mood to listen anymore, he didn’t say anything in the end.

Forget it, I’m used to seeing Koizumi in deep thought, it’s just as normal as Asahina dressing up as a maid, and Haruhi’s confidence which always seems to come from nowhere.

It was also as normal as Nagato’s near invisible existence…… I had wanted to say that as well, but……

A week later in our battle with the Computer Group, I saw something that was totally unexpected.

The next day after school, we underwent special training using the guys in the room next door as our imaginary enemies.

Officially it's called special training, it's just another excuse for playing video games. Now allow me to explain in detail the game which the Computer Study Group has developed.

<The Day of Sagittarius 3>.

That's the name of this game software. It sounds cool at first, but then you get the feeling of how silly it really sounds. Never mind, names don't really matter here, what matters is the software itself. If I didn't say that, then the SOS Brigade would lose its meaning of existence. When it comes to meaningless names and non-existent founding principles, I don't think any organization out there can best our brigade. Anyway, since it's the third installment of the series, that means the game has two earlier versions as well.

First of all, let us delve into the background story for <The Day of Sagittarius 3>.

The year is unknown, all we know is that it's set in the far distant future. Humans have expanded outwards into space and have occupied a sizeable portion of the galaxy already. This is basically a galactic-scale space battle set in a solar system. Two space powers have bickered with each other over border conflicts, as neither side is willing to back down, a war has been waged. For simplicity's sake, one side is called the <Computer Group Federation>, and the other the <SOS Empire>. As for the story, basically both powers, both possessing massive starfleets, have thrown all their military might into this endless war for a long time, and ends when one side is totally annihilated and the credits roll. Diplomatic and strategic commands don't exist in this game as they get in the way of battle, this completely suits Haruhi's preferred mode of battle.

The opening screen is pitch black, the blue dots flashing at the bottom of the screen are the fleet that's controlled by us. The indicators are in the shape of little isosceles triangles. There are five of them in total, lined up in a row. This is the total force of the <SOS Empire> under Haruhi's command. One triangle represents 15,000 star destroyers. So there're a total of 75,000 vessels. Each fleet is escorted by a small number of supply vessels. The conditions for victory are to command these vessels and annihilate the enemy, which also have the same number of vessels. But this time the rules are a bit different, and that is to destroy the enemy's commanding fleet—for us it would be the Computer Group president's fleet, while for them it would be Haruhi's <Commander Haruhi Fleet>. Regardless of the losses sustained or the number of enemy vessels destroyed, if one side's commanding fleet is destroyed, then the battle is over.

We're each allocated one fleet per person, and we can only control the fleet allocated to us. So no matter how unreasonable Haruhi gets, there's no way she can interfere with my notebook computer.

One of the main features of this game is its search function. If we don't use this function, there's no way we can know what space debris awaits us ahead, let alone track the enemy's position. So if we wanted to move our fleet but are afraid of colliding with any unidentified objects, we would have to send out intelligence vessels to scout the area ahead and wait for them to return before we can analyze the situation ahead. It is that complex.

The visibility radius for each fleet is only a few centimetres (on the computer screen), if we were to move without scouting ahead, then we run the risk of being attacked from an unknown direction, and not even knowing where the enemy is.

On the other hand, the intelligence collected by individual fleets is shared between all allies (I think it's set that way). For example, the whole fleet can receive information on what Nagato's fleet and her surveillance vessels have detected. In other words, even if I sit back and not do anything, I can still see the map slowly expand to reveal the positions of various planets, asteroid belts and enemy vessels.

Despite this, the whole battle map still looks very vast. So being able to swiftly detect the enemy's position becomes very important as it's the key to victory.

There are two weapons available. Lasers and missiles. Lasers can hit any enemy vessels that enter its range. Missiles are much slower, but they have a homing device attached. So it's impossible to dodge them. In order to survive, one must shoot them down.

Generally speaking, this is a two-dimensional space battle simulator. As this battle simulator is real-time and not turn-based, if one were to play in a relaxed manner, they would be wiped out by the enemy in no time, so it's kind of tricky here.

Facing the imminent battle ahead, we entered gaming mode the whole week. Only Haruhi sat at her commander desk using the desktop computer, while the remaining four of us had to stare at the notebook computers on the long table, constantly clicking our mice. Looks like this surreal scene is going to be part of the SOS Brigade's activities for some time. We first practiced against the computer, and even though we had the difficulty set to "VERY EASY", it still took us three days to score our first victory. Our progress in gaming skills is just as fast as slowly drilling through the earth's crust with an electric drill.

"Man! I got hit again! This game is driving me crazy!"

It wasn't just Haruhi, even I was extremely annoyed at getting such a score against the computer. But this had nothing to do with the computer difficulty, but rather due to someone who kept impatiently charging her fleet into enemy lines and getting annihilated.

"We're going to have to rework our strategy."

I moved my eyes away from the screen, which was showing the words "GAME OVER" with melancholic music.

"We'd better reallocate the attributes for each of our fleets, especially your commanding fleet."

There are three adjustable attributes for each fleet, "Speed", "Defense", and "Attack". Each player starts with 100 points, and these points are allocated to the above three attributes at the

beginning of the game. Like “Speed 30,” “Defense 40,” and “Attack 30.” Haruhi kept adjusting her fleet to “Speed 50,” “Defense 0,” and “Attack 50.” As a result, the hull armor on her vessels were as thin as paper. I really wanted to tell her, “Don’t underestimate the galaxy!” That girl just wants to rush in and sink the enemy. Even with me and Koizumi trying to shield her, if her commanding fleet gets wiped out as a result, then there won’t be a starfleet for her to command.

“I can’t take this anymore! This is so troublesome! What’s so fun about this game? Can’t it be more simple?”

Despite complaining, Haruhi still decided to restart the game. The screen on my notebook computer once again shows the logo for <The Day of Sagittarius 3>.

Haruhi cheerfully clicked her mouse and said,

“It would be better if this was a role-playing game. They would play the Evil Dark Lord, while I’d be the Fated Hero. It’d be great if we got straight to a boss battle right after the opening movie. I’ve always wondered, why do these bosses always hide in the dungeons? Wouldn’t it be better for them to appear right at the beginning? I’d certainly do that if I were the Dark Lord. That way, the Hero wouldn’t need to waste their time wandering around in the dungeon, and the story could come to an end quickly.”

I ignored Haruhi’s insane ramblings, and looked at what the other members sitting in a row were doing. Sitting nearest to Haruhi is the Advising Officer Koizumi, followed by me and Asahina, while Nagato sat furthest away.

“This game is indeed hard to play. Maybe it’s because I’m not too familiar with video games. The controls are easy, but the commands can get very tricky.”

Koizumi commented in his usual way and gave the same smile as when he was playing Othello. On the other hand, Asahina, who still wore her maid costume even though it was not necessary for this occasion, said,

“Uwaa~. I just can’t move this as I want it to. This game is set in space, but why are our movements limited to the second dimension?”

She asked such a basic question, while amateurishly moving her mouse.

I can understand the concerns of these two members, but I was totally mystified by the remaining member.

“……”

Nagato Yuki looked at the screen intently like a mathematician trying to solve a highly advanced math problem. She was the first to get used to the game; unaffected by Haruhi’s fleet charging blindly, it was thanks to her precise command of her fleet that we were able to score our first and only victory.

Of course I took precautions. During lunch break I told her not to use any tricks like magic or data manipulation. Nagato stared at me for a few seconds, then silently nodded her head. The burden on my shoulders instantly lightened a lot. Thanks to this, I was able to take on this game without any worries. If we really do beat the Computer Group, then it must be a mistake on their part. It's only natural for humans to make mistakes. Yup, I've even prepared excuses to shirk off any responsibilities.

All that's left is to formulate a strategy where we can give the enemy a run for their money, then come up with a tragic script where all our efforts end in vain. Oh yes, I must remember to burn Asahina's secret photo album onto a CD-ROM as well.

The week passed by like the tumultuous autumn weather, the fated day has finally arrived.

Haruhi led us to our seats in the Literature Club room and we waited for the battle to commence. The Computer Study Group also stood by in their club room, staring at their monitors, which were counting down the seconds before the battle began.

Before the battle begins, the screen shows the stats for each fleet. It's actually just the names and what types of vessels each fleet has. The fleets' vessel counts and positions were classified.

Starting with the commanding fleet, the Computer Group's fleet names were <Dies Irae>, <Equinox>, <Lupercalia>, <Blindness>, and <Muspelheim> respectively.

Even the names sound so revolting, I have the impression that they had a lot of free time on their hands making up such names. However, it seems I wasn't the only one who wasn't interested in how they come up with their names.

"How annoying! From the right side we'll just call them Enemies A, B, C, D, and E. The commanding fleet is A."

Haruhi swiftly gave the enemy fleet their new names, and completely discarded the egotistical sounding names. Speaking of which, if you could do that, why not change the name for my as well?

"The battle's about to begin. Everyone listen up, we must take the initiative, this is only the beginning. Our enemy is not only the Computer Group. Only by total annihilation of the enemy can the reputation of the SOS Brigade be spread all over the galaxy! Sooner or later, I'll contact the Education Ministry and have them set up branches for the SOS Brigade in various public schools nationwide. Just ambition alone is not enough, you need to learn to ask for a bigger cookie!"

I wonder what everyone here thinks of Haruhi's megalomaniacal delusions. Koizumi flicked the loose muscles on his chin with his thumb; Asahina tucked the sleeves of her maid uniform; I pretended do some deep breathing and sighed deeply; while Nagato's brows moved a little bit.

“Forget it. It’s not like we’ll lose anyway. I forbid you to show mercy on them! Showing mercy to the opponent is the biggest insult to them! If you want to fight, give it your all!”

I’ve always wondered, what is the raw ingredient for this confidence? How I wish she would share some with me, even two milligrams of it would do.

“Really? Then let me cheer you up.”

I don’t know what was going on in Haruhi’s head, as she began staring intently at me.

Don’t look at me like that so seriously. No matter how long you look, there’s no way I can give you a lucky Tarot card.

And so, we looked at each other for up to ten seconds, in the end I couldn’t stand it anymore and moved my eyes away first.

At this moment,

“Well? You feeling better now?”

Haruhi gave a victorious smile. I didn’t know that sort of staring game can raise one’s spirits.

“I focused my energy into my stare and channeled it into your body! Don’t you feel all warm right now? You should be sweating now, right? Next time I think I’ll do that to anyone who looks depressed!”

I beg you, please don’t stare at people like that in front of others anymore, because my mind has misinterpreted Haruhi’s intention to channel her energy into me as an intention to plot something against me.

“The battle will commence soon.”

Hearing Koizumi’s enthusiastic voice, my vision returned to the computer screen. Asahina looked nervously at her own screen as she began to mutter to herself,

“……W…what should I do? I don’t think I can do this……”

Don’t worry, it’s just a game. No one’s really going to die. Even if there are casualties, it’ll just be the computer monitors.

Let us pray that Haruhi won’t end up throwing all the computers out of the window in anger.

じ～…。

1600 hours.

The marching tune signaled the commencement of the battle for the computer's ownership.

At first, the <SOS Empire> starfleet had devised the following strategy.

<Yuki Fleet> would take the vanguard position, with the <Koizumi Fleet> and <Kyon Fleet> behind covering the sides. Much further behind would be the <Mikuru Fleet> and <Commander Haruhi Fleet>.

……That's it, really.

Upon being asked to send surveillance vessels to scout the area, Haruhi simply replied, "Too bothersome!" since she's only interested in charging forward and destroying the enemy. It was a fact that she wasn't going to be of much help even before the two fleets had clashed.

Asahina was of even less help than Haruhi, so we allocated all the supply vessels to her fleet. Hence the triangle indicating the <Mikuru Fleet> was slightly larger than the others, and as a result, her movement was much slower. I gave her a clear instruction, "If you are approaching the battle lines, hurry up and get away." I believed that to be the most suitable action for her.

Besides, Haruhi's fleet attributes have now been set to "Speed 20," "Defense 60," "Attack 20." This was mainly due to the fact that if Haruhi's fleet gets destroyed, we would lose the battle, so raising her defenses became a priority. Fighting in the front lines, Nagato, Koizumi and my fleets were all given even attributes of "Speed 33", "Defense 33", "Attack 34". It was arranged this way because we had intended for Haruhi to stay behind while we buy time for her. But in no time, the situation has now become like what was described in the beginning of this story.

Right now, as I had mentioned to everyone in the beginning, the simulation battle between the Computer Study Group and the SOS Brigade is imminent.

"All right then, I'll retreat to the back first while you take care of the enemy. Mikuru-chan, let's sit back and watch the show."

"Ah……o…okay……"

Sitting to my right, Asahina nodded her head obediently, then said in her sweet and soft voice,

"Good luck, Kyon-kun."

That was really an effective motivational call. If the commanding fleet was the <Mikuru Fleet>, then I would block all the missiles that came her way, without hesitation. Yet I had to be in charge of protecting that tyrannic despot. If I were a feudal lord with a sizeable military force of my own, I would definitely turn against her. Sadly, this game doesn't provide a "Mutiny" option. Oh well, I'll just have to do my best and take on the enemy ahead.

1615 hours.

Nagato suddenly began typing fast on the keyboard. She was so fast, it was hard to see with the naked eye, literally. It looked as though she regarded the mouse to be too inconvenient. I don't know when she began, but Nagato had created her own Macro program for <The Day of Sagittarius 3>, allowing her to command her fleet more directly through the keyboard. Thanks to this, the bravery and tenacity of the <Yuki Fleet> was certainly an eye-opener. Its ferociousness in battle could probably match that of Belisarius of the Byzantine Empire under Emperor Justinius' rule. Unfortunately, they were badly outnumbered.

The only fleets engaged in battle for our side were the <Yuki Fleet>, <Koizumi Fleet> and <Kyon Fleet>. The enemy had four fleets engaging us, save their commanding fleet <Dies Irae> (Enemy A) which was hidden. From all the past battles, we have learned one basic lesson: the outcome is usually decided by the numbers of both sides. Being three against four, our chances of uncorking the champagne bottle to celebrate were very slim. Our chances would hardly increase even if we threw Haruhi's and Asahina's fleets into the front line. If we did that, it would just make the enemy's work of destroying us all at once much easier.

"The enemy seems to be luring us with a crane wing formation."

Advising Officer Koizumi whispered to me,

"If we chase them, we'll fall right into their trap. I suggest we stay put and concentrate on our defenses, what do you think?"

It's useless telling me, I think it's a good idea, but what matters is Haruhi's opinion.

Besides……

I looked over Asahina's shoulders and at Intelligence Officer Nagato's face.

I don't know what the reason was, but Nagato was surprisingly more proactive than usual. Her face was as blank as always, yet, since the battle began, her eyes had been fixed on the screen, and the vessels of the <Yuki Fleet> were already in active battle. What inner emotion of Nagato's had <The Day of Sagittarius 3> triggered?

"Analysis"—Nagato hadn't been lying when she said that. This emotionless alien-created living humanoid interface has now fully understood the Computer Study Group's self-developed game like the back of her hand. She probably knows the game better than its original creators. As long as she is here, all computers created by modern Earth civilizations are like antique clocks made before the Industrial Revolution for her, and can be dealt with easily.

Yet, Nagato's pupils have gone from her usual glowless obsidian black to a glittering chromed silver color. I was beginning to miss her old self……

Showing an energy never seen before, Nagato continued typing on the keyboard, with swift motions. Her eyes were moving around the screen, never stopping once. She had discarded the Graphical User Interface for the game and had opened a small window of her own, where she insanely keyed in her commands nonstop.

"……"

The <Yuki Fleet> moved swiftly, constantly sending out surveillance vessels which worked hard searching for the enemy fleet's position. We now knew that ahead of our empire's fleet lay <Enemy B> and <Enemy C>. Nagato engaged them both on the front line, all on her own. I'd better go and help her, I can't just stay behind and watch.

Just as I was about to move, the <Kyon Fleet> got showered by a rain of lasers from its side.

"What the…!?" I exclaimed.

"Ah…damn!" Koizumi shouted as well.

I looked carefully and noticed that the <Koizumi Fleet> was under heavy bombardment on its port side. <Enemy D> and <Enemy E> had suddenly come out of nowhere and attacked us both left and right. In no time, the vessel count for the <Kyon Fleet> had dramatically decreased.

"What the hell are you doing!?"

Haruhi yelled at me using a yellow loudspeaker.

"Now go retaliate properly for me! Show them what we've got!"

I'd do that even without your reminding. These guys sure are gaming professionals, to be able to sneak through Nagato's surveillance network, but we can't go on getting beat like this.

I gave the command for the <Kyon Fleet> to change directions. At once the entire fleet turned 90 degrees to the right. Then, when I had locked down the enemy within my shooting range, I fired…… but, just as I tried to do that, <Enemy E> quickly turned around and disappeared into the darkness of space. Now that pissed me off, and I sent out surveillance vessels to scout for his position, but I could not find a single enemy vessel.

"Damn, they got away."

It seems like they have employed a hit-and-run strategy using fleets with high "Speed" attributes. <Enemy D>, which was attacking the port side of the <Koizumi Fleet> also took its cue and disappeared without a trace. Now I get it, Enemies <B> and <C>, which were engaged in battle with the <Yuki Fleet>, were diversions, while their main forces were <D> and <E>. In that case, their commanding fleet, <Enemy A> doesn't even have to fight and can hide safely in the depths of the galaxy. That seems to be their overall strategy.

“Wah~~……I’m scared~~……”

Despite her clumsy movements, Asahina had precisely steered her fleet to the corner of the screen. Though she was a bit too far away to be able to provide supplies to our fleet’s depleting defenses. Even then, at this rate, our fleet would be wiped out before we would even have to worry about running out of energy and missile supplies. The <Computer Group Federation> had seized the initiative.

From then on, like wild dogs returning constantly to the scent of a sweet bone, <Enemy D> and <Enemy E> continued to harass the <Kyon Fleet> and <Koizumi Fleet> with their hit-and-run tactics. Every time we gave chase, they would release their homing missiles and disappear without a trace. We were currently struggling to deal with these frustrating tactics. Slowly depleting our strength while avoiding a one-on-one showdown is the sort of tactic that Haruhi hates most.

On the other hand, fighting on its own, the <Yuki Fleet> has tactically evaded the wave attacks of <Enemy B> and <Enemy C>, and provided us with some much needed relief. If it hadn’t been for her fleet, we would already be floating in the galaxy as space debris. Even if we should lose this battle, she should at least get an award for bravery.

“……”

Nagato didn’t even look like she was breathing as she stared into her screen; never once did her hands stop typing on the keyboard. I bet the guys from the Computer Group were looking surprised as well, since I was surprised myself.

Has Nagato been infected with Haruhi’s unyielding attitude?

1630 hours.

The situation has now gone from bad to worse.

Realizing that the <Yuki Fleet> wasn’t easy to deal with, only <Enemy B> stayed behind to take on Nagato. With the exception of the their commanding fleet <Enemy A>, whose whereabouts were still unknown, the remaining three fleets have now begun a well-timed wave attack on us from our left and right. I was impressed with how well Enemies <C>, <D>, and <E> were coordinated, when <C> was targeted, <D> would come out to attack; and when we gave chase to <D>, <E> would fire its lasers at us. Dealing with their diversionary hide and seek methods, I had the impression I was taking on seasoned professionals and was certainly not enjoying it at all. I really wanted to ask them to not push too far, but when I remembered this battle concerns the fate of a few computers, I sort of sympathized with them.

Yet our situation was not optimistic at all. Like I said before, our chances of losing were near 90%, but I had wanted to lose in blazing glory. At least allow our ships to sink gloriously in the

midst of all the glittering explosions. I mean, can't you give us the feeling that "we lost, but that sure was fun, and we did our best"?

But look at this! We're now dying a slow and ignominious death!

"I can't take this any longer!"

I should say this was expected, Haruhi now gave her commanding fleet a simple command.

"All fleets full speed ahead! Kyon, get out of my way! I'm going to find their leader and beat the crap out of him before returning victoriously!"

As the <Commander Haruhi Fleet> wanted to speed past the <Kyon Fleet> and <Koizumi Fleet>, we both quickly surrounded her fleet in a fish like formation.

"What are you doing!? Koizumi-kun, are you trying to stop me from destroying the enemy as well? I order you to back off at once, or you'll be relieved of your duty as Advising Officer!"

"I certainly do not intend to get in your way, Commander."

Koizumi may have said that, but he had no intention of giving the command to move his fleet off.

"Commander, please allow us to take charge of this situation. I am willing to risk my life in protecting Your Excellency to the very last moment. As for my punishment, I'll let Your Excellency decide that once the battle is over."

"That's right."

I decided to help Koizumi.

"If you really want to raise our chances of winning, then stay put. Besides, we still haven't found their commanding fleet."

"That's why I have to go search! He should be around here……" She pointed at a spot on her screen, though we of course couldn't see anything from our seats. "……I guess. I'm going to go there in a straight line, and then have a one-on-one battle between us leaders!"

I don't know where she's headed, but I fear that before she gets there, the <Commander Haruhi Fleet> will become like a beehive that gets attacked by a bear before its winter hibernation.

Haruhi now clutched her mouse and ordered her fleet to charge forward as though trying to pick a fight with someone.

“That’s why staying put isn’t going to help a lot! What the hell!? Your <Kyon Fleet> just keeps letting the enemy run away! And your forces are depleting as well! Looks like I need to move out after all!”

“That’s why I’m telling you to stay put first!”

I commanded my own fleet and blocked the path of the commanding fleet, Koizumi did the same thing without saying a word. Perhaps realizing the situation we were in, the three <Computer Group Federation> fleets continued their hit-and-run tactics, while Asahina’s <Mikuru Fleet> was now lost in some unknown corner of the galaxy.

“W…where is this place? Oh dear~~. I can’t even tell left from right anymore……”

Sitting to my right, Asahina continuously looked into her screen and mine. She was close to tears as she said,

“Where is everybody……”

I’m so sorry. Please just wander wherever you like and continue to be a lost child. It’s for your own good.

Thanks to the <Commander Haruhi Fleet> getting stuck on the backside of the <Kyon Fleet>, I was unable to move and have basically become a shield for Haruhi’s fleet. Wave after wave of attack has made my fleet’s triangle indicator shrink smaller and smaller.

“Out of my way!”

I couldn’t even if I wanted to. The ungrateful <Koizumi Fleet> had already dodged aside before Haruhi rammed her fleet into mine, pretending to be busy engaging with <Enemy D>, while leaving the troublesome task of stopping Haruhi to me.

I tried my best to move my fleet, which was now merged with the <Commander Haruhi Fleet> and clicked my mouse frantically, trying to drag it to a suitable spot on the screen. The ever shrinking triangle representing the <Kyon Fleet> now changed direction at a snail’s pace. But as snails move very slowly, my fleet was constantly being locked on to and hit by enemy lasers and missiles.

This is it, we’re done for.

Even if I had to raise the white flag, I was left with no choice. Please try to understand, our commander was simply too dumb, even if we had a very slim chance of winning. I think I should have deserted her already before the battle began. No matter what the situation, if the leader isn’t calm, then there’s no way an organization can work efficiently. I may not know the details, but hasn’t it always been like that?

As I continued to bicker with Haruhi both in the real world and the virtual world, the most far-sighted and calmest member of the SOS Brigade continued to battle on.

……That's what I thought at first.

I later realized that wasn't the case, because the member sitting farthest away on the long table suddenly increased the speed of her fingers, so fast that if I didn't record it with a high-speed camera and play it in super slow motion, it would be nearly impossible to see clearly what was going on.

Being frustrated to the point of losing her cool had always been Haruhi's privilege. But this time, this rule may not be entirely accurate.

Right now, the one showing more passion than anyone of us here is none other than the pride of the SOS Brigade, the knowledgeable Intelligence Officer, bookworm and original Literature Club member……

"……"

Nagato Yuki.

1635 hours.

"Whoa!?"

An unbelievable scene unfolded before my eyes, and I gave a foolish yell as a result.

"What the hell just happened?"

The visible areas in the map of the <SOS Empire> have now expanded to three times their previous size. The positions of Enemies <C>, <D> and <E>, which kept appearing and disappearing, can now be clearly seen. One of them was on the left wing preparing to fire lasers at Koizumi's fleet; another moved off and turned around again, preparing to make its next attack; while the third one had the immobile <Kyon Fleet> and <Commander Haruhi Fleet> locked in its firing range. As for why the enemies' position could be clearly seen, this was because……

The <Yuki Fleet> had divided itself into twenty fleets.

"This is too incredible!"

Koizumi's praises sounded empty to me.

"As expected from Nagato-san to notice this feature. I had thought of using it as well, but as it was too complicated, I gave up before even trying."

“Wait, Koizumi,” I said, “Is this feature even in the instruction manual?”

“Of course! It’s right at the back. You want me to teach you? First hold down the Ctrl and F4 key, then decide the number of fleets you want your fleet divided into……”

“N…no thanks, I don’t think I’ll ever use it.”

I once again examined the screen.

The triangle representing the <Yuki Fleet> had shrunk dramatically as if being shone on by some strange light. Replacing it were twenty small triangles of equal sizes. I moved my mouse cursor over one of the small triangles, and it indicated the words <Yuki Subfleet 12>.

Subfleet?

Of the little triangles labeled 01 to 20, some continued to engage themselves with <Enemy B>, some sneaked past the gaps in the enemies’ defenses to scout the unknown areas of space, while others either flew around or came to support the struggling <Kyon Fleet>.

Koizumi, would you please care to explain?

“Well……this function allows you to divide a single fleet into two or more subfleets and give them separate commands. The most you can divide into is twenty-seven, if I remember correctly. That’s what the instruction manual said.”

“What’re the advantages in doing that?”

“As you have seen, the area being scouted would increase, it’s like having twenty extra pairs of eyes. Besides this feature, another advantage is that by dividing your fleet, you could have one subfleet act as bait while the other can sneak behind and ambush the enemy. But this feature seems to be too complicated, which is why even the Computer Study Group didn’t use it.”

Koizumi leaned his face towards me and said in a voice which Haruhi couldn’t hear,

“This is because these multiple subfleets can only be controlled by one player. Because when you concentrate on one single subfleet, it’s not possible to look after the other subfleets, which would basically be immobile puppets. It simply is impossible for a human to command twenty or more subfleets.”

I imagined the horrified looking faces of the people next door, and then turned my head sideways.

“Hey, Naga……”

The sound of Nagato hitting the keyboard no longer gave the usual clattering noise, but now sounded like all the keys were being slammed at the same time.

“U…um……won’t you break the keyboard if you hit it so hard……?”

Asahina asked looking terrified at Nagato, but Nagato didn’t even look at her. Her eyes were fixed on the screen, which was no longer showing the game graphics, but a black background with a bunch of letters, numbers and symbols, which reminded me of those BIOS interface screens from the computers of the dinosaur age. What’s more, the words and symbols were scrolling by at an incredible speed.

“What is it?”

Nagato asked me without even turning her head.

“……Um, I……”

Na, Nagato-san? May I ask what you’re doing right now?

I now felt an invisible pressure emanating from the aura of Nagato’s slamming of the keyboard. Even my mutterings were now becoming polite.

I reconfirmed what I saw on my screen, the twenty <Yuki Subfleets> were like animated tea leaves being granted with life, toying around with the enemy. There was no problem with the game interface…… no, wait a minute, didn’t I specifically told her not to cheat?

“I didn’t.”

Nagato replied. For the first time she turned and looked at me, while her hands remained busy as usual.

“I did not perform any data manipulation. I have obeyed the rules of the game as you told me to.”

As if afraid of being scanned by Nagato’s vision, Asahina inadvertently backed off. Nagato’s eyes were now staring straight into mine.

“I did not carry out any actions beyond the limits of this simulation game.”

“I…I see. Sorry for doubting you.”

I felt a terrible aura now rising from her short hair.

Yet, Nagato’s expression and gaze remained the same, not carrying any emotions at all. Normally, she would reply in a calm tone, “I see.” And then fall into silence. But this time she gave me an unexpected reply.

A very shocking reply indeed.

“It is the people from the Computer Study Group whose actions could be considered as cheating, not mine.”

At the same time, Haruhi’s fleet broke through the protective barrier of the <Kyon Fleet>.

“Too slow! Why is it so slow? Would it be faster if I poured some mineral water over the computer?”

She may have been complaining, but Haruhi couldn’t hide her excitement at finally being able to move.

I leaned forward over Asahina and quietly asked Nagato,

“What do you mean when you said they’re cheating?”

Without stopping her high speed typing, Nagato replied without any emotion,

“They are using commands not present on our computers, giving them an advantage over this virtual galactic battlefield.”

“What commands?”

Nagato fell silent for a while, as if trying to reorganize her thoughts and blinked,

“Their search mode is turned off.”

After saying this, she then explained further in a calm tone.

According to Nagato, the Computer Study Group had set their battle mode with “Search Mode Off” at the beginning of the battle, while we had no such option available to us. But I still don’t understand what the difference was between “On” and “Off”. What does it mean really?

“When search mode is turned on, the players would have to scout the area ahead on their own. When it’s off, they wouldn’t need to do any searching. They have nullified their search mode, rendering it obsolete.”

Erm……could you please elaborate further?

“When search mode is off, the whole map would be shown.”

In other words……

“From the beginning, they could see the whole map of the galaxy, including the location of all of our fleets.”

For Nagato, that was the simplest, most straightforward way of explaining it.

“That is not all.”

The alien-created living humanoid interface continued without smiling.

So, the vessels of the <Computer Group Federation> even have teleportation devices built into them. No wonder they could disappear at will. The <SOS Empire> is at least 500 years behind them technologically. It’s like the samurai infantry of the Sengoku period facing off against the Self-Defense Force artillery. There’s just no way of winning.

“That is correct.”

Nagato also confirmed what we already knew,

“Besides losing, we didn’t have any other choice.”

Didn’t? Nagato was using past tense. So, what about now? When I was hoping she would change to present tense, I noticed Nagato’s obsidian eyes revealing a stirring emotion I had not seen before. I sat back upright and said,

“But Nagato, I still hope to continue playing this game without the use of any alien powers. I know those guys are cheating, but that is also why we mustn’t resort to cheating with magic as well, or we would be no different from them. No, we would be worse then they’re, since your magic isn’t even within the bounds of this Earth.”

“I will not go against your instructions.”

Nagato replied immediately,

“I was trying to rewrite the program under the boundaries of current Earth technology. I promise you, I will not manipulate any existing data information. I will take measures to counter the Computer Study Group within the limits of human ability. Please allow me to do that.”

Are you asking me?

“The one who placed a limit on my data manipulation abilities is you.”

……

I’ve known this girl for nearly half a year already. During this time, I’ve noticed beneath her emotionless face that she was experiencing some very minor emotional changes—that is if she

had any emotions—but I do have a certain degree of confidence in this. At that moment, I saw revealed on Nagato's pale face, in microscopic proportions, a very determined look.

Asahina looked at me, terrified. Koizumi also looked at me, but with a smile of course. Only Haruhi was shouting something, firing away her lasers and missiles. At this rate she'll run out of ammo and will be surrounded by enemies. There isn't much time for me to decide.

How should I decide? ……I hesitated for a few seconds, it's rare for Nagato to be so passionate. I think this is the first time I've ever seen her like this. I was considering whether this was a good thing or not. She may be a living humanoid interface created by the Integrated Data Sentient Entity, that resembles a human in every way, but as with the most perfect artificial intelligence, there may come a day where even she would desire to be human herself.

Never once did I believe that this wasn't a good thing.

"Very well, Nagato. Go ahead and do it."

I gave an encouraging smile and slapped my chest to reassure her,

"As long as it's within the confines of human ability, then you're welcome to do whatever you please. Give those guys at the Computer Group the scare of their lives. If you can scare them into not daring to ever demand compensation from us again, which is what Haruhi would like to see, even better."

Nagato stared at me for quite a long time—at least for me it felt like a long time.

"I see."

A simple response later, Nagato hit the Enter key. Just like that, the tables were instantly turned in our favor.

1647 hours.

The cunning trap has now been laid.

Though the sudden change in situation had me speechless, my level of astonishment was merely that of a rookie Shaolin monk who has just begun his training; it was nothing compared with that of the Computer Study Group, who were probably now in total pandemonium as if Wall Street had just crashed.

This was all thanks to Nagato's cloning techniques. I was really grateful that Nagato was on the same side as I was. I even thought of buying one or two presents to thank our mighty goddess Nagato. Maybe I'll get her an interesting book next time. Speaking of which, when is her birthday?

No matter, we can discuss those details later. For now let us return to the present situation.

As if the players' fears were being manifested in the virtual world, the enemy fleets on the screen all stopped moving one by one.

It seems Nagato has hacked into the Computer Group's five computers using her notebook computer and directly rewritten the program for <The Day of Sagittarius 3>. Don't ask me how she did it, how should I know? I may not have understood that part, but I was sure what her sole objective was, and that was to forcefully turn on the search mode for the enemy as well. As a result, the visible map of the <Computer Group Federation> would have shrunk dramatically, and the shrouded areas on their screen would be increasing as well. Before that, they had had no need to send out any surveillance vessels, and in fact they have never done so, according to our Intelligence Officer.

After locking the enemies' search mode into the "On" position, Nagato went further and rewrote the game's source code and had it locked as well. Now no one else was able to change the code besides herself. However, she didn't delete the teleportation function, but instead made some minor adjustments and executed these changes. This was part of a little plan that Nagato had thought up.

She did all of the above while commanding her twenty subfleets at the same time, and without using any mysterious alien powers to boot. Even within the boundaries of human ability, she was already exceptional.

"Excellent, now comes our chance for retaliation."

Koizumi carried a happy smile and commented on the current situation on the screen,

"Please have a look here, Enemies <C> and <D> have been intercepted by the various <Yuki Subfleets>, and have lost track of our positions. <Enemy E> is currently engaged in combat with us. As for <Enemy B>, he will soon enter the firing range of the <Commander Haruhi Fleet>."

"Enemy sighted!"

Haruhi's excited yell was proof of Koizumi's accurate commentary.

"Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Haruhi continued to yell like a maniac, her forehead nearly hitting the screen.

The <Commander Haruhi Fleet> has been released from its sealed state and is now firing on all cylinders, releasing all its lasers and missiles and charging towards the enemy. The terrified <Enemy B> quickly turned around and tried to escape, but my <Kyon Fleet> was already waiting for it.

"Oh no you don't."

I moved my finger and clicked, releasing all the lasers I had at <Enemy B>.

“Damn it Kyon! That’s my prey! Back off!”

Attacked from both sides, the fleet size of <Enemy B> was quickly decimated. The indicator for <Enemy B> then made a small buzzing noise and began to blow up like fireworks, marking its farewell from the screen.

Looking for her next prey, Haruhi now moved her mobile weapon discharging fleet to the side of <Enemy E>. Already struggling with Koizumi’s fleet, <Enemy E> now had to take on two fleets, and its vessel count decreased dramatically.

Now in a desperate situation, <Enemy E> finally decided to throw all honor out of the window, and for the first time used the hidden command only they know of in front of the <SOS Empire> starfleet.

“Hey! It’s disappearing! Wha…How is this possible!?”

Haruhi shouted, I knew the moment had finally come. Under heavy bombardment from both ends, <Enemy E> began to slowly disappear from its spot.

That was its teleportation function. Though strictly speaking, it should be called something else, since there’s no such thing as teleportation in this day and age.

However, they had fallen straight into Nagato’s elaborate trap.

“Huh? Something else’s coming out this time.”

When Haruhi asked that question, I had already stopped what I was doing.

“Wah?”

Asahina made her cute scream, blinking her eyes and staring at her screen.

“Kyon-kun, that thing I’m controlling, I don’t know where it went……”

<Enemy E> wasn’t the only one being teleported. With the exception of the <Commander Haruhi Fleet>, which remained in its original spot, all other fleets on both camps have now undergone spatial transportation.

This is because Nagato had rewritten the program as: “Once the Computer Group utilizes the teleport option, then with the exception of the <Commander Haruhi Fleet>, all fleets from both camps will be forcefully teleported. After teleportation, they would appear at their designated spots.”

This is called “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Only that our cheating was much more subtle.

Right now, I guess the chaos in the room next door should be even greater than when their search mode was forcefully turned on. Because appearing on my screen was the enemy’s commanding fleet <Enemy A> (originally called Dies something) making its first ever appearance. I confirmed its location and shrugged my shoulders,

“I guess this is what they call karma.”

The Computer Group president’s <Enemy A> was now right in front of the <Commander Haruhi Fleet>. Right behind it was the <Mikuru Fleet>, which had also been teleported, and was unscathed. Its starboard was now being targeted by the <Koizumi Fleet>, which had been teleported a few inches, targeting its left was now the recombined <Yuki Fleet>, and hanging around nearby was the nearly obsolete <Kyon Fleet>, which had shrunk a lot from its original size. As for the other fleets of the Computer Group, they were now scattered across the four corners of the galaxy. Even if they rushed back at full speed, there was nothing they could do to help.

And so, <Enemy A> was now completely surrounded by the entire fleet of the <SOS Empire> and had no means of escape.

“I don’t know what on earth’s going on, but……”

Haruhi now revealed a very exhilarated look and raised her hand,

“All forces fire at will! Cleanse the enemy’s commander in the fires of hell!”

Under her command, Haruhi, Koizumi, Nagato and I all emptied our fleets’ weaponry at the same time. Even Asahina, who shuddered at the cold voice of Nagato going, “Fire,” frantically made her first ever attack of the day on the surrounded <Enemy A>.

“I’m so sorry……” Asahina said.

The Computer Study Group president was completely taken by surprise. He probably had wanted to hide in a safe spot to enjoy the show, only to first have everyone’s search mode forcefully turned on, and then get suddenly transported right in the middle of the enemy fleet to die.

“Sigh……”

Sigh. I quickly withheld the words I was about to say. Koizumi gave me a cheeky smile. I’m going to pretend I didn’t see that.

I turned again to my screen, the president’s <Enemy A> fleet was now being showered by lasers and missiles, like a capsized turtle struggling to move around. Well…… he pretty much deserved

it. They were the ones who cheated first. Though later on we cheated even more thanks to Nagato Yuki, so we weren't qualified to criticize him too much.

Nagato never stopped keying the firing commands into her keyboard. The vessel count of <Enemy A> was decreasing at the same rate as our ammo count. Finally the <Yuki Fleet> fired a laser beam with an error margin of a few decimal points and decimated the remaining few enemy vessels with perfect precision. That was the last thing the enemy fleet saw before meeting its demise.

A light marching tune began to play, and the flashing words on our screens signaled that the battle had finally ended.

"YOU WIN!"

1711 hours.

Ten minutes after the battle had concluded, someone came knocking on our club room door.

Rushing in looking abashed were the guys from the Computer Study Group. The president said in a dispirited tone,

"We've lost, we've been completely beaten. We now offer our surrender. I'm terribly, terribly sorry, please forgive us. We've totally underestimated you, and we've made a mistake, a very terrible mistake."

Standing in front of the apologetic president, whose head had bowed so low looking like a sundial, was Haruhi carrying a beaming smile. Under the watchful gaze of the Lord Haruhi, the Computer Group members quickly went pale and fell silent.

"You've even discovered our little tricks…… it's true that we employed dishonest methods, but we never thought…… that the source code could be rewritten right in the midst of the battle…… it was unbelievable, but it really happened……"

The president looked wearily around the room as if entering another virtual world. Haruhi raised one of her brows and said,

"What the hell you muttering about? I have no time to hear excuses from sore losers. You still remember our agreement?"

She joyfully waved her finger, giving an indication that read Don't think you can get away with this. Completely indulged in the joys of victory, Haruhi never felt that the battle was won too unnaturally. For this girl, a victory is a victory.

“I bet you have nothing to say right now. The desktop here is now mine, as well as those four notebook computers over there. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten ever saying that, if you did, then I’ll have to sentence you to a horrible death! Right, I think I’ll give you a smaller sentence, go run ten laps around the school field naked and shout ‘I’m being chased by little green men!’”

Haruhi’s unreasonable demands now made the members of the Computer Study Group droop their heads even lower. I don’t know if I should pity them, or whether it’s just the atmosphere being too tense……

“Ah…… yes, I’ll go brew some tea for everyone.”

The ever understanding Asahina now stood up and walked towards the kettle, while Koizumi smiled sardonically and helped take out some paper cups. Nagato continued to sit in her steel chair, looking emotionlessly at the dejected and broken guys now standing in a row in front of Haruhi.

As Haruhi enthusiastically made her speech, one of the members, the president that is, walked slowly towards me.

“Hey,” he whispered to me, “Who was that person? With such elite hacking skills, they could go anywhere in the world…… actually, I think I’ve guessed who it is……”

Nagato lifted her head to look at me, while the president turned to look at Nagato.

Oh well. Even an outsider can tell that Nagato is the brightest of us all.

“I need to talk to you.”

The president said to Nagato,

“Whenever you’re free, would you mind coming over to the Computer Study Group to hang out…… I mean, help out occasionally?”

He began his persuasion. A while ago, he was still looking like a dead fish being left to dry in the sun, and now he was suddenly back to life again. This usually happens to people who have surrendered completely, when they quickly throw all dignity out of the window.

Nagato now looked as though she’d had a motor installed inside of her. First she looked at the president, then turned to look at me. She didn’t say anything, and just stared at me with those dark crow-like pupils, giving me a questioning gaze.

“……”

What's she doing? Transmitting telepathic waves? Or does she want me to decide for her? You're putting me in a difficult position with that expression of yours (though there's no expression at all). He was asking you, surely you could decide on your own? It ought to be like that.

As learned from Nagato, I tried to reply with a speechless gaze……

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

Haruhi now came and interfered,

"Our Yuki's not for you to borrow so easily! You'll have to ask me first!"

Haruhi sure has a talent for eavesdropping, she had heard everything that was being said. Looking at her with her hands on her hips, I even wanted to commend her.

"Now listen up! This silent girl is an irreplaceable member of the SOS Brigade. I laid claim to her first, so she's not going anywhere!"

In the beginning, you actually laid claim to the Literature Club room, not Nagato.

"What difference does it make? I wanted both the club room and Yuki from the beginning. Everything in this club room, even a stale bottle of coke, is mine and is not for sale!"

Mine, all mine! Haruhi puffed up her sailor uniform and proclaimed her sovereignty over the room fearlessly.

"Umm, hold it,"

I gave it some consideration and finally said.

I may not look it, but I'm confident that I understand Nagato's expressions better than anyone else. After all, I actually met Nagato three years ago. Though Nagato has been flawless in withholding all emotions, I've still felt that she isn't entirely emotionless. I noticed it when she was stuck in the endless summer vacation, and I felt it as well during this showdown. Oh yeah, I've nearly forgotten, it was the same during our time in the public library as well.

Even Nagato would have things that she is fond of.

Come to think of it, during our <The Day of Sagittarius 3> showdown with the Computer Group, the one showing most enthusiasm was Nagato, and not Haruhi. Looking at how she typed in her commands on the keyboard, I knew she was pouring even more passion into this game than into her reading. Though I had no idea of knowing whether that was a side effect of requesting her not to use her powers to cheat. But I just felt she really enjoyed herself when she was keying in the commands. If she had a new hobby besides reading, I think it should be encouraged. Instead

of staying in the SOS Brigade headquarters as an ornament all the time, it would be a good thing if she tried to experience school life more often and interacted with other people.

I would think Nagato gets tired of observing Suzumiya Haruhi all day. Even alien-created living humanoid interfaces need to take a break occasionally.

“Go ahead and do whatever you please.”

Today, I decided to take the president’s side.

“You like computers, right? Then, whenever you feel like it, go play with them as much you want. Even if it’s just helping them detect bugs in their own developed games, I’m sure they’ll be very grateful. And you probably have a better chance of getting in touch with advanced gaming tools if you go there.”

Nagato remained silent, but I noticed a slight shaky movement in her face. She seemed to be asking me whether it was actually fine or what she should do. Her dark candy-like eyes revealed the same sort of hesitation shown when not knowing which move to make in a chess game.

It felt like she considered this for a long time, when in fact it only took three blinks of her eyes to decide.

“……I see.”

Before I asked what she had decided, she mechanically nodded her head and looked at the president, and said without changing the tone of her voice,

“I can come occasionally.”

Of course, Haruhi was bound to complain.

“We were the ones who won, why do we have to lend our most important member to them? Nagato’s loan is expensive, I tell you! Yes, 1000 yen per minute!”

If it’s only 1000 yen per minute, then I’m willing to pay.

“Commander Suzumiya.”

Finished drinking his warm tea, Koizumi now approached Haruhi with a relaxed smile,

“Your Excellency, sometimes it’s important to show mercy to the vanquished. Besides occasionally showing off their might, having a generous spirit is also a pre-requisite to becoming a great leader.”

“Hmm? Really?”

Haruhi’s mouth now resembled a duck’s beak……

“All right then. If Yuki feels okay about it…… However! I’m not returning the notebook computers to you. Oh, and……”

Stopping halfway, Haruhi suddenly thought of something. Haruhi stared at the president and gave a gleeful smile. She sure has a lot of expressions.

“The vanquished have to listen to whatever the victor says. That’s the cruelty of war.”

She snatched the tea from the tray which Asahina had quietly brought over (I think it was called “Karigane”) and swallowed it in one gulp. She then said,

“From now on, you’re to swear absolute allegiance to me. I will treat you well, since I only merit people in terms of their ability. As long as you work hard, I’ll promote you into proper members of the brigade as well. Let’s say……ah yes, let’s say if we have to face off with the Student Council, you’ll have to stand by to receive my commands. Until then, you’re just preparatory members.”

At this rate, does she plan to assimilate the whole school into the SOS Brigade? But Haruhi was too joyful to pay any attention to my worries,

“Koizumi-kun, go prepare a treaty.”

“Understood, Your Excellency.”

Koizumi gave the cunning smile of a powerful regent pretending to obey the commands of the young emperor he had installed, and sat in front of his newly acquired notebook computer and began typing away.

A few days later, the scenery in the club room remained unchanged, save for the increase of a few unused notebook computers.

Dressed in her maid costume, Asahina wiped the room clean with a mop then went to the kettle to boil some hot water; Koizumi was playing board games on his own; and Nagato sat in her corner quietly reading her book. Before Haruhi talked, we all enjoyed this brief moment of peace.

In this normal scene in the SOS Brigade club room after school, sometimes, very rarely, the bookworm alien would be missing from the room. Whenever I noticed she’d gone missing, she would quietly return a few minutes later to read her book. Personally speaking, I feel Nagato is the true master of this room.

"……"

Reading a foreign detective novel in its original language, Nagato didn't seem to have changed a lot on the outside. It was hard to say about the inside…… not even I would know that.

As usual, Nagato would spend most of the time here in this room. Occasionally like an unpredictable breeze, she would float over to the room next door, and that was enough.

"Kyon-kun, here's your tea. This time I'm trying Chinese tea. Hee hee……how is it?"

I received my teacup from the gently smiling Asahina. After tasting the tea, I realized my tastebuds were being given a sensation that was similar to that of the other tea leaves that she had brewed. As long as it's served by you, even wheatgrass juice will taste like wine to me.

While thinking of what words to use in my reply as Asahina awaited my response, I pondered; I don't suppose I'll get dragged into any strange events any more.

It was just before Christmas and the winter vacation that I found out how wrong I was.

When Suzumiya Haruhi disappeared, I realized I was terribly mistaken.

Prologue — Winter

My thoughts on Suzumiya Haruhi, needless to say, are like describing patterns of a patchwork carpet. However, should I attempt to describe this individual using words and phrases that I can understand, it would be the following warning:

Here is the person that can't be allowed anywhere near the ICBM launch controls in the whole of Japan.

Normally, a high school girl has close to zero chance of owning such an item, but anytime when you pull this woman into the fray, even the next-to-impossible becomes impossible-to-avoid. Either that or the two would cancel out, leaving behind nonstop chaos that she is somehow immune to. To her the matter would just be an issue of two choices, choose one. That person might not be as evil as the timed-explosive that starts its countdown without being set, but she is more radioactive than a nuclear reactor meltdown. Experience dictates, however, that even if containment of the gremlin is impossible, as long as you set her on 'vibration mode,' no matter how big a leak she springs up, the leak can be mended.

Therefore I have to think of some ways to alleviate her boredom, so she would have no time to think of nukes, if only for a little while. As long as she has some other things to burn her passions at, just like tossing a bottle cap towards my Calico Shamisen who would bite it for a good three minutes, she would have a three minute attention span towards that 'thing'-

-the above are the mandates Koizumi proposed in the past. Even up till now that guy has yet to change his point of view.

Because of that, we are slapped face-on with the most idiotic thing that can happen.

Face-on? Gasp, yes. It is not a chance encounter, not a finding and not a meeting. There is no word that describes our current situation better.

Because we are now, truly, totally in deep trouble.

Snow Mountain Syndrome

“Crap.”

Haruhi, ahead of me, spells out what she really thinks.

“You can’t see anything in front of you!”

Would you like to know where we are? We were at some lone island in the summer, then what of winter? Put yourself in Haruhi’s shoes and take a guess.

“It is peculiar.”

Koizumi’s voice drifts from the rear.

“We should be at the base of the mountain after hiking such a long distance.”

My hint for everyone is that we’re in a cold and snowy place.

“So, cold, oh… Uuuu~”

The piercing winter gusts cut Asahina-san’s voice. I turn my head to reassure the one in the ski jacket wobbling like a little duckling and nod to cheer her on, then turn back toward the front.

“…”

Perhaps it’s just a psychological thing, but I feel that Nagato, who is leading the way, seems to be dragging her steps. The snow crystals stick to her boots, they accumulate with each passing step. Where would one experience such things?

I won’t keep you guessing any longer. Here’s the answer:

It is a silvery white world as far as the eye can see, where all that exists other than snow is snow wherever you go.

Other than a snow mountain where else could this be?

And it’s a snow mountain hit by a blizzard.

To be accurate – Thanks to an incoming snowstorm, our return trip to the lodge is a total disaster – this description would match our current status 100%.

Going back on topic, just who made up this script? Only now am I willing to believe that there is an end and that all five of us will face the threat of death, perhaps only to see the light of the day as five frozen corpses appearing when spring melts the snow away.

Koizumi, think of something!

“I am out of ideas.”

Koizumi says while staring at the compass.

“The direction seems to be correct. Nagato’s navigation is incomparable. However we have been walking for hours on end without sight of the foot of the mountain. Normally, this would be a most bizarre situation.”

Then what’s up right now? Are we trapped in this huge skiing retreat forever?

“The only conclusion that can be drawn right now is that it is a bizarre occurrence, an unpredictable abnormality. Not even Nagato-san understands the cause and only knows for sure that we’re facing some adversity.”

You don’t have to tell me that since I already know. It’s strange for Nagato in the lead to be unable to find the way home.

It must be one of Haruhi’s out-of-this-world ideas at work.

“Don’t conclude that just yet. My instinct tells me that Suzumiya-san will not burn her bridge.”

Why are you so sure about that?

“Because Suzumiya-san is looking forward to the mysterious murder mystery in the lodge. For that mystery I have made quite a few arrangements and thought it through.”

Ever since summer, a murder mystery has naturally been planned for the winter co-ed. Last time it was a horror story that ended with an anticlimax, and this time it was a deductive game with everyone knowing the drill. The cast is the same, featuring Arakawa the butler and Mori the maid. Tamaru is also going to guest star using the same role, the same relationship and the same name.

“That’s true…”

Haruhi can’t possibly wait to unveil the conspiracy of the culprit and the identity of the killer, so she would not do something subconsciously that would deter us from returning to the lodge given that a murder mystery awaits her.

That aside, my sister, Tsuruya-san the extra that fills in all the time, as well as Shamisen are waiting for us at the lodge.

To be honest, the lodge that we borrowed belongs to the Tsuruya family. That upperclassman of boundless energy agreed right away to providing the lodging so long as she came along. Bringing Shamisen with me was due to Koizumi wanting him as a part of the set. My sister

became my luggage by her own accord. The two plus one however are not a part of the team that are facing certain catastrophe. Shamisen should be curled up in a ball by the fireside and Tsuruya-san should be building a snowman with my sister who doesn't know how to ski. That's the last of them that I recall.

To Haruhi, those three are reserve members, which is the reason why Haruhi doesn't object to meeting them again.

Why is that? Why is it that we cannot get back to the SOS Brigade winter retreat with heating?

Even with the blessings of Nagato Yuki, we still can't find our way back. Just what is going wrong?

"We keep meeting freak storms in both the summer and winter…"

Could it be that there exists some law of nature which dictates that during any long vacation, we will be thrust into some anomaly that is beyond human comprehension?

I, as if drunk on a cocktail mixed with anxiety and uncertainty, call upon my memory in a haze.

"Why did things turn out like this?"

Flashback mode, start.

…….

……

…

Winter co-ed is almost predestined. If we could foresee the future, even if it did happen in real life, we would be unfazed.

Besides, the moment the murderous lone island cruise (complete with a typhoon) ended, someone had already proclaimed loudly what was to come. Who else but Haruhi? The ones that swallowed her might and her expression would be all of us excluding Haruhi. The tour guide would be Koizumi.

I had originally hoped that Haruhi would become distracted by winter, but alas, the chief's memory doesn't fail at times such as this –

"Annual Countdown in Snow Storm."

Haruhi handed piles upon piles of paper stapled together to us. After handing them out, she smiled a kidnapper's perverted smile.

“As planned originally, this winter we’re going to a lodge covered in snow, to jump-start part two of the mystery tour!”

The location was the clubroom, and the time would be the twenty-fourth, right after the end of year ceremony. We had a ceramic pot atop a small portable gas stove, placed on an end of a table that wobbled about as we tossed ingredients of all kinds into the pot, substituting a hot pot for lunch.

Haruhi tossed in meat, fish and vegetables in no particular order as maid-version Asahina-san, adorned with a head scarf, separated the food with a pair of chopsticks and handed out the broth once in a while. Nagato, Koizumi, and I were directed to consume. Apart from the group of five in the SOS Brigade, we had a guest today.

“Waaa! This is great! What is this? (gnawing)… Haruhi, you wouldn’t be the iron chef? (chewing)… Yoho! This soup broth is the best! Yumyumyum~ (devouring)”

The guest would be none other than Tsuruya-san. The originator of such lively tones looked to be competing against Nagato who was eating silently as she called about and moved her chopsticks with haste, scooping the goodies onto her plate.

“One must have a hot pot in winter! Kyon as a reindeer is also the bomb, haa, this makes my day!”

So the only one that gave me an encore for the performance was Tsuruya-san and Tsuruya-san alone. Haruhi and Koizumi were just faking the smiles. Asahina-san had suddenly covered her face and shook her shoulders; Nagato from top to bottom displayed signs of trying to find the source of humor using logic, while I felt a sense of total embarrassment as sweat poured down my face. There goes any shred of ambition to enter the entertainment industry… Never mind, it’s better this way.

There must have been some reason for Tsuruya-san to be our guest, not just to dip into the feast nor to be Asahina-san’s entourage. As for that special reason…

“About that cottage in the blizzard.”

Haruhi’s description upgraded from a snow storm to a blizzard.

“Rejoice, Kyon! Who knew that Tsuruya-san would lend her villa to us for free! That, and it’s top notch! I am already boiling in anticipation! Come, come, come! Don’t be shy, dig in!”

Haruhi tossed a couple of pork cutlets onto Tsuruya-san’s plate while scooping the angler slices onto hers.

“Normally our family would go there for vacation…”

Tsuruya-san stuffed her mouth full of pork and gulped it down.

“But my dad’s out on a business trip to Europe this year so he’s away. Since his work will be done in three days, we’ve decided to go to Switzerland on a skiing trip. Therefore I will go with you guys to the villa! It’ll be a blast!”

Apparently Tsuruya-san handed her own villa over for the co-ed retreat the moment Asahina-san made a passing mention of our winter plan. Koizumi pushed it along and agreed to it wholeheartedly as he nodded all the while, and Haruhi was as excited as a cat met with a plate full of sashimi when the final plan was handed to her.

“Tsuruya-san, this is for you!”

Haruhi took out a violet cuff band, scribbled “Honorary Consultant” on it, then handed it over to her – and that’s the end of that chapter.

Koizumi had a beaming smile on his face as he looked on at Haruhi, Nagato, and Tsuruya-san eating as if in an eating contest. Maybe noticing my look, he opened his mouth:

“Please don’t worry. This time we will not be scaring anyone. It will simply be a prearranged game of deduction. Actually we’ll have the same crew.”

Taken literally, Arakawa the butler, Mori the maid and the Tamaru brothers would all show up for the show. That didn’t matter. More importantly, just what did they normally do? Are they the administrative staff of the ‘Organization’ ?

“They are actors of a small guild that I happen to know… Can you accept that as an explanation?”

So long as Haruhi was fine with it, I had no qualms.

“Suzumiya-san’s main focus is whether or not the event is interesting and nothing else matters. Although that is the most difficult problem to address… I am not sure if she will find the scenario satisfactory, and thinking about this gives me a stomach ache.”

Koizumi pressed his stomach, feigning heartburn, but still retained that smile of his. What a terrible actor.

I am more of a normal person than Haruhi, given that I can’t place fun in the center and ignore everything else. I looked around for something that could calm my nerves, and I stopped first at the expressionless façade of Nagato. Good old poker face Nagato. The typical Nagato Yuki that I have come to know was gulping at the hot pot ingredients as if nothing had happened.

“…”

Whatever, I thought to myself.

There should be no critical mishap this time that would burden Nagato tremendously. No, more like such an event should not occur. Looking at the order of things, we should have smooth sailing this time. Nagato was not overly active in the summer co-ed and I hoped that it would be the same in this co-ed. Best leave all the work to Koizumi and his friends.

I thought of this as I read the booklet by my side.

According to the schedule on the booklet, the departure date was 30th December, a day before New Year's Eve. The snow mountain was not all that far away. It was reachable within a couple of hours on a bus ride, pretty much within the same day.

When we arrive, the orders of the day would be to ski, ski and ski. A party would follow at night (no alcohol allowed), with the dining arranged by Arakawa-san the butler from that lone island (although a fake butler, he was so impeccable as to be even more convincing than a real butler, so I've no complaint) as well as Mori-san (although a fake maid… et cetera). The Tamaru brothers would appear a day after as the late guests of honor, and after that the curtain on the detective game rises.

Following that, New Year's Eve would be spent dissecting the act and the conspiracy behind it. The group would meet at the crack of dawn, each in turn taking a guess at the "Poisoned Chocolate Case," then, Koizumi the mastermind will reveal the truth nonchalantly as set in advance. Everyone then can bid farewell to the passing year without regrets, and say hello to the new year. Happy New Year!

– and that would be the entire co-ed plan in a nutshell.

The moment I lifted my head up, I ran right into Haruhi's gloating face. It wasn't a real shocker for her to look at me in this godforsaken hour anymore.

"We should really celebrate the coming of new year!"

Haruhi picked up the leek with her chopsticks.

"And then, give proper thanks to the new year, so that the new year will be a good one as well. I really believe that the coming year will be one where the fortunes of SOS Brigade will turn in our favor."

Missy, it's fine and all that you like to personify the year. However, I do not think that your definition of a good year is the same as the one for us as a whole.

"Really? I keep thinking that this year has been interesting, which is why I wish for the same next year. Ahh, Mikuru-chan, the broth's about to totally evaporate, hurry with the water."

"Okay, coming right up."

Asahina-san headed to the teapot in running steps.

“Eishu.”

She carefully poured the water from the seemingly heavy teapot into the pot.

Watching the alluring visage of Asahina-san led me to look back at the misadventures of this year, and my emotions wavered a little. Haruhi said that this year has been interesting. If I was asked the same question, my answer would definitely be yes.

Actually, when I was a kid I had hoped for encounters that I could boast about. Be it meeting an alien or anything for that matter, I really wanted for something of the like to happen, so as to add a new, exciting page to my childhood. It’d be bizarre not to be raving over fantasies coming true. Although, as it is right now, having new chapters of life added without pause is beyond my expectations.

That said, having lived through these events, how I really feel is as follows –

– yes, very pleased.

I can only declare this so loudly after the turmoil is over. It has taken yours truly quite some time to reach this state of mind. However, if I had a chance to say any more about how I feel inside, I would say that I wish for more peaceful days. Personally, I do hope for more of those times spent goofing around in the club room; just a little more.

“You and all that crazy talk.”

Haruhi’s cheeks were filled with angler fish liver as she barked out:

“You’ve been just messing around! Don’t come and tell me that you’ve not had enough. If you want more, then make use of these days before New Year and really party hard until the last moment!”

“No, thank you.”

This twerp has no idea how much suffering I have endured and how I recovered from all those wounds. Claiming victory in that baseball game, putting an end to summer vacation, restoring the derailed reality to order since the filming of the movie, going back and forth from the past and future and even to re-do the recent past. It is true that all of this has been at my own discretion so I cannot blame anyone, but I can’t justify it given how I shouldn’t be this busy right now if I have no plans to become a teacher.

Never mind, I can’t vent to Haruhi even as I complain to the world.

“There’s still plenty of time to party hard after we get to the lodge.”

I brushed aside Haruhi’s extended chopsticks to pick up the cabbage in the pot. This was a rare Haruhi-made dish. I better scoop some grub into my stomach before the hungry group of females

(except Asahina-san) claimed it all, given that I have no idea if we will have such a delicacy again.

“We’d still make it.”

Haruhi flung beef onto her plate.

“Just partying isn’t enough, we have to set it ablaze. Listen up, there’s only one New Year’s Eve every year. Think about it, New Year’s Eve this year is once in a lifetime, just as today is. This day won’t come again after it is gone. Therefore, you wouldn’t be living up to today if you don’t live it to the fullest. That’s why I hope I can live all of my days fully; making them unforgettable is best.”

Hearing those naïve words, Tsuruya-san opened up as she chewed on some half-done chicken meat:

“Whoa! Haruhi, you remember all three hundred and sixty-five days of the year? Way to go! Ahh, Mikuru, I need some tea.”

“Of course, coming right up!”

Asahina-san took that clay pot, and poured out the boiled tea carefully into the cup that Tsuruya-san had lifted way up. Although treated as a mere waitress, Asahina-san seemed to be more than happy to do this. Haruhi, the chef that tossed whatever she could grab into the pot was also quite into the moment, Koizumi’s graceful smile could reflect on even the steaming hot pot as a canvas, and the quietly dining Nagato was hammering it down silently. Tsuruya-san, the honorary consultant was here only as a reserve member, but it didn’t really affect the mood of all of us getting along together as per usual in the SOS Brigade.

I was presently very sure how precious this time really was. As I had chosen the world on this end, more tall tales surrounding Haruhi would no doubt define our path. Before the day I hit the ground, I expect to have been through one or two more headaches of a crisis.

Besides, the slider has yet to appear.

“Hurry up and appear already!”

My tongue slipped. Thank goodness that Haruhi and Tsuruya-san were knee-deep in a fight for the mushroom, so it seemed that nobody caught what I said to myself.

However, I noticed that Nagato’s eyelash moved just slightly.

I took a general glance outside the windows, and the shy sky made one feel rather lazy as the snow drifted about. Koizumi caught where my sight was at.

“The destination of our trip will make you sick of snow when we’re done. By the way, do you like to ski or sled? Part of my job is to take care of the gear.”

“I’ve never sledded.”

Tossing out this ambiguous answer, my view left the winter sky. Koizumi kept up his harmless smile, but opened his mouth to pry at me:

“Which yuki (snow) would you be looking at? The one drifting down from the sky, or-”

It was not to my benefit to stare Koizumi down. I shrugged and thrust myself into the mushroom fight.

This hot-pot feast slipped under the teachers’ radar and was not sighted by any tattletale. Well perhaps they did find out, but instead turned a blind eye at us. Whatever it was, when we were fully stuffed, we cleaned out the bowls and the garbage and promptly left the classroom. The moment we walked out of the gates, the snowfall stopped.

After bidding farewell to Tsuruya-san, who had to hurry back to her family’s Christmas dinner, the SOS Brigade proceeded to the bakery. After we picked up the extra-large cake that Haruhi had ordered, we set forth to Nagato’s apartment.

It wasn’t as if we took pity on Nagato spending Christmas alone, rather it was that Nagato’s place provided the unique opportunity for us to enjoy the cake together and to go crazy with no one to frown at us. I wondered which one of us was luckier: Koizumi with Twister or me with the cake. Haruhi, in the lead and skipping about, looked to be rather pleased; there was no doubt about Asahina-san (whose hands were held and being waved about) and even the muted Nagato moving step by step must have been infected by that cheery mood.

From the looks of things, I would say that such incidents as having Santa Clauses raining down on us instead of snow should not occur. Haruhi had fully experienced the commoners’ Christmas Eve and seemed to have enjoyed it. Her spirits were on par with that of my little sister. Well, it could just be the day that stood out.

For no particular reason, I am more forgiving during this period. Even though Haruhi was on a Santa hunt and spent the time stalking the streets in the winter air, I just might oblige her to the end with a wry smile.

As we played the numerous games that Koizumi had brought along, each and every one of us seemed to have a good time. Nagato’s attention was on <<The Day of Sagittarius 3>> elimination game on two networked notebooks, while Haruhi and I pushed and shoved on Twister. This really was a wild night where passing couples would jump into the fun.

With that, we had a fun-filled Christmas Eve.

The days between Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve went by in an instant as if Haruhi were pushing along Chronos, the god of time. We did a total clean up of the clubroom, and even got a phone call from a seemingly brain-dead high school former classmate. After being begged, I went along to a football game with him. The end of the year approached during this time.

The New Year. Would the new year be good or bad, I did not know. Personally, if I didn't improve my marks, I would fall flat on my face.

My mom's desire to shove me into a cram school was already beyond mere rhetoric. Had I joined some full-fledged sport club and really got into it, or even just some established clubs that were not so well featured, I might have some excuses against it. It just so happened that I am in a lacking and obscure group that is involved in nothing but messing around – at least that is how things appeared to outsiders. If there was ever a bunch of students that did poorly in school but still wanted to advance, I'd be wondering what they learned in high school.

Maybe there is no such thing as fairness, as Haruhi's marks were splendidly off-the-scale high. Koizumi's marks from the previous final would be good enough to be on top of the pack, Asahina-san also attended to her lessons very keenly perhaps due to her interest in archeology, and Nagato is a no-brainer.

"Never mind, let's save it for later."

The pressing matter was to deal with the winter co-ed event. It was fine just to look into that for now. Schoolwork could wait till the coming new year. The countdown to the new year co-ed had to happen in this year.

With that –

"Let's go!"

Haruhi called forth!

"Yahoo-!"

Tsuruya-san cried back.

"The weather apparently is clear, making today perfect for skiing. Although this is according to the weather at this point in time."

Koizumi relayed the forecast.

"Skiing? Where you scoot about on the snow?"

Asahina-san remarked as she lifted her chin, which was sealed tight by her scarf.

"…"

Nagato stood still as she held her small luggage in one hand.

"Hi!"

My little sister jumped out.

We were standing over the station bright and early. We would take the train, and hop between connecting rides. Estimated time of arriving at the snow mountain would be by afternoon. That was not an issue; it was rather how my little sister came out uninvited that posed as the real issue…

"No matter, what can you do if she's already here? Let's take her along, probably easier to solve this if we go together. You won't cause us any trouble right?"

Haruhi leaned forward, and flashed a smile at my sister.

"If it were somebody that I don't give a damn over, I would've kicked him out already, but your sister is different from you, having such an honest personality, no reason to say it's not OK. That and she took part in the movie and Shamisen needs a playmate."

True, even Shamisen, my cat was included in the luggage. Want to know why that was? Listen to what the event planner of the SOS Brigade winter co-ed had to say:

"The cat needs to be there for the plot of the suspense drama."

Is it a suspense mystery similar to *The Cat Knows*? (猫は知っていた)

Koizumi, sitting atop his own luggage continued:

"It doesn't matter which cat, one way or the other, so long as the cat can crack the case. His superb acting performance in the movie however makes me want to have him come back and act once more."

The present Shamisen is but a typical house cat that can utter no word. It is best not to have high hopes for his acting skills. I went on and said the following to Haruhi, who was nose-to-nose with my sister:

"Thanks to her, I was caught in the act as I was leaving the house."

It was simply too early to be leaving at the crack of dawn. I had already sealed my mouth when it came to my mom to preserve my own hide. My sister had no sense that I was to head off with Haruhi and gang on a trip. However, a leak sprang. Just as I was in my room, shoving the dozing Shamisen into the traveling bag for a kitten, my sister had to stumble her way in. It could've

been that she needed to head to the washroom and went the wrong way, being half-asleep, I suppose.

Things got out of hand right after that. My sister's hazy eyes suddenly expanded wide open –

"Where are you taking Shamisen? Why are you dressed like that? What's with the luggage?"

Jeez, shut up. With that I witnessed a tantrum worse than in summer, from the fifth-grade eleven year old that is my sister, making full use of her hands and legs as she clung onto my bag and wouldn't let go. It was the splitting image of those colorful clams that have solid steel grips on the rock they are on and won't let go no matter what.

"It is still quite manageable with one more on board." Koizumi smiled. "We won't go over budget paying for a child fare. Besides, both Suzumiya-san and I feel that given that she has already come this far, it would be too cruel to send her home."

After goofing about with Haruhi, my sister sneaked her little face into Asahina-san's full bosoms, and hugged the knees of the still Nagato. Finally, she was swung in circles by the laughing Tsuruya-san and wouldn't stop squealing.

Thank goodness that she's a sister. Had she been a brother, he would've been covered up in a bag in some dark alley by now.

On the express headed for Snow Mountain, my sister's urge to play did not subside and she tunneled about in between all of us, burning away at her energy. Getting so worked up now would have you totally exhausted by the time we hit our destination. By that time I would have to carry my snoozing sister, but my warning on that fell on deaf ears. Haruhi and Tsuruya-san, in the same class as my sister, were still psyched up; even the more refined Asahina-san seemed to be excited. Even Nagato, who shoved her book into her luggage after only a few pages, observed my sister with quiet stares.

I hugged my chin over by the windowpane, pensively staring at the fleeting view. Koizumi sat in the seat next to me. Haruhi and the other girls were right in front of us. They turned the seats to face each other, so the five of them could play UNO together. Don't get too loud, you'll startle the other passengers.

The discriminated-against Koizumi and I played Joker for about ten minutes after the train set off. It got progressively more and more boring, so I gave up. Why must us two men be cast as tragic fodder?

If that was so, all that was left was to let the mind's eye drift to a glorious feast. Imagining the yet to appear skiing attire on Asahina-san was far more constructive. Just as I was deep in thought over how I should forge a scene of just me and her on the ski slopes in lovey-dovey mode…

"Meow~"

A sound came from my carrying bag, and cat whiskers appeared from the opening.

After the movie phenomenon, Shamisen turned into a well-behaved house cat of low maintenance, leaving no trace of being a stray to anyone. He would behave and wait for feeding time to come, and would not scratch or chew on things. Maybe it is because the number one priority to the fellow is none other than sleep. He was snoozing the moment he was in the cat cage in the morning. Having said that, no matter how lazy the cat is, it'll get sick of sleep and wake up eventually. He brushed the edges of the lid as if he was bored. However, there was no way for me to let him roam about in the car.

"Hold on for a little longer."

I persuaded him, as he lay beside my legs.

"After we get there, I'll get you new cat food."

"Meow~"

Shamisen fell into silence, seemingly understanding my intention. Koizumi, amazed, remarked:

"At first, when he first started talking, I was totally blown away. Having caught this cat was to have struck gold. I don't just mean having found a male calico, but to have him so understanding of emotions makes him just incredible."

It was Haruhi that grabbed him from a pack of stray cats, which happened to have a mutation in the chromosome that only occurs once in a couple thousand cats. I really should tell Haruhi to buy lottery. No matter what we got, we could somehow offset the costs of our activities. I feel rather bad having to use the Literary Club's budget all the time.

"Lottery… If Suzumiya-san really won the lottery, the aftermath might be difficult to cope with. Just think, what would happen if she had millions of dollars in her hands?"

I don't think of such things often, but I believe the twit would start buying up second-hand fighter jets from the Americans. A single seater is ok, the real headache would be the twin-seater. You don't need to think to know who's going to be stuffed into the rear as a co-pilot.

Either that, or she'd lavishly toss it all on advertisements. One of these days as you sit back and watch prime-time entertainment, you might suddenly run into "This show is solely sponsored by the SOS Brigade" on the screen. Just the thought of our advertisement being broadcast to every family in the nation sends chills down my spine. If Haruhi became producer, any show would become totally whacked. A kindergartener would fare better in stocks than her at the helms.

"Perhaps she would do things that would benefit the masses, such as setting up some grants for inventions, or to create a laboratory."

Koizumi fiercely launched the wind direction balloons into the air. You lose 90% of the time in life however and the stakes here were just too high. Even a skilled statistician would hesitate at this. We shouldn't ask for more trouble without some very convincing reason to do so.

"It would be enough to have her buying popsicle sticks in supermarkets that might fetch a prize."

I looked at the scenery outside once more. Koizumi leaned back, sank into the chair and shut his eyes to rest a little. The moment we got there we would be totally occupied, so storing up energy was the right thing to do right now.

The scenery outside became more and more rural. As we pass each tunnel, the view became more silvery white. I headed into sweet dreams as I enjoyed the view.

With that, we concluded our train ride as we hugged our luggage and rolled out of the train station. What greeted us was the dichromatic view of the clear blue sky accompanying the glaring white snow and the familiar greetings from a group of two.

"Welcome, everyone. It has been some time since we last met."

With a deep bow, here was the best actor as the butler –

"You must all be tired from the long trip. Welcome."

– alongside the beautiful maid of age unknown.

"Not at all, not at all, sorry for making you so busy."

Koizumi, ever so able to make such talk, headed their way and stood alongside the two of them.

"This would be the first time that Tsuruya-san has met them. They are my friends, Arakawa-san and Mori-san. I have asked for their assistance regarding the dining accommodations for this tour."

Their attire remained exactly as they was in Lone Island… here was the three-piece wearing, gray haired gentleman butler Arakawa, and wearing a plain apron atop a dress, the maid Mori san.

"I am Arakawa."

"I am Mori."

The two greeted us at the same time.

In this chilling temperature, they greeted us without donning even a coat. Would this be part of the act, or was it a sense of professionalism stemming from their roles that prompted them into this?

Tsuruya-san dangled the heavy luggage around.

“Hi! Nice to meet you! Since Koizumi-kun recommended you all, I have no doubt whatsoever. Please take care of us. Use the mansion however you like!”

“Thank you very much.”

The sincere Arakawa-san bowed once again, and lifted his head after some effort, as he revealed a stiff smile on his face.

“It is of much relief to see all of you in high spirit.”

“I apologize for the poor reception in the summer, please do forgive us.”

Mori-san revealed a warm smile, and the moment she saw my sister, that smile softened even more.

“Wow, such a cute little girl.”

The uninvited guest quickly sprang back to life as seaweed does when it hits boiled water. “Hi!” she said and quickly dashed to Mori-san’s skirt.

Haruhi walked forward and stepped onto the snowfield.

“It’s been too long. I am really looking forward to the winter co-ed. That typhoon which blew over in the summer was quite the bummer, so I plan to make up for all of that in one scoop this time around!”

With that, she turned around and went on as if she was a rook about to charge:

“Let’s get going! We can really go crazy after this! Let’s get rid of all the dirt from this year out of us, and welcome the new year anew! Not even one speck of remorse can be taken to the new year. All right!”

We each answered in our own way. Tsuruya-san lifted a hand up high, shouting “YA-!” Asahina-san seemed rather shy and timidly nodded, Koizumi had only smile after smile, Nagato as per usual was totally silent while my little sister wouldn’t let go of Mori-san.

As for myself, I looked aside at the horizon to avoid that beaming-to-the-point-of-glaring smiling façade of Haruhi.

The sky was absolutely clear and showed no sign of an impending storm.

At this point in time.

We went in 4x4s to get to Tsuruya-san's mansion. The drivers were Arakawa-san and Mori-san, so one could conclude that Mori-san must've at least been the legal age to obtain a vehicle license. This would be quite a breakthrough since I had little doubt that she would be of our age group from before. No, no, I don't mean anything else. Having Asahina-san as the sole busy maid is enough. I have no desire toward Mori-san, just to clarify. This is important.

The car ride through the view blanketed by snow was rather short. It only lasted about fifteen minutes, and the four-wheeled monsters came to a halt in front of a very classy building.

"Quite the atmosphere!"

Haruhi, the first to step off the car, remarked fondly.

"This would be the most petite and beautiful of the villas that we have." Tsuruya-san said. "But I really like it here, since it is the most comfortable."

This place was not far from the station, and there was a skiing ground accessible on foot. Based on the location it was clear that the villa could fetch quite the pretty penny. The comment that this was the smallest mansion was no lie, for her to say this was the smallest and the most beautiful should be due to having to compare this to her own Japanese style estate. If I am to use the impression of a commoner to describe this, I have to say that the stretch of this property is on par to that of the lone island resort we were at this summer. Just what kind of shady things did the Tsuruya family do to have obtained such grand houses?

"Please come in."

Arakawa the butler was in the lead. He and Mori-san obtained the permission of Tsuruya-san and had the key beforehand, and headed here a day in advance, which meant that they had been setting the stage since yesterday. This was thanks to the minute detailed planning of Koizumi as well as revealing how easy-going the Tsuruya family was, with just this detail.

This villa of all-wood construction would be overbooked if it were open to the public come skiing season. Just as I stepped into the apartment being utterly thankful, a small premonition slipped past me.

What that might be I couldn't put to words. However, I definitely had a slight premonition slip past me.

"Hmm…?"

I turned around and gazed in awe at the internal furnishings of the villa.

Tsuruya-san could not stop smiling with Haruhi showering her with her seductive praise, and Tsuruya-san replied with booming laughter. Koizumi and Arakawa-san along with Mori-san were in conversation. My sister took out Shamisen right away and hugged him as Asahina-san

took a deep breath upon putting her luggage onto the ground. Nagato locked her vision towards the sky at some unknown, unclear target.

No anomaly.

Afterwards, we would spend the next few days to enjoy the R&R vacation that is co-ed in name and to return to our posts to enjoy everyday life…

In theory.

We all knew that the murder mystery act that would take place is just an act, not an actual case, so Haruhi's mood would not waver. There should be no need for Nagato and Asahina-san to intervene. Koizumi's powers also have no use. To put it another way, what was to come would be almost like insider trading and not some bizarre murder case in a thick mist nor some gigantic cricket that would spring forth the moment you pry a room open, so nothing extraordinary.

Although, just what was this feeling? It could only be described as incoherent, which by now is a common term… Not unlike having a phantom passing by. Yeah, just like that never-ending summer break which eluded us. It felt rather similar, except without the déjà vu…

"I give up."

As if I caught the slippery body of a fish, that feeling vanished from my hands.

"Am I just thinking too much?"

I shook my head and headed up the stairs inside the mansion, inching toward my allotted room. The internal furnishing could not be said to be lavish, or perhaps it was just me not having an eye for quality material. Maybe the moment that I started asking how much this seemingly simple stair banister costs an astronomical quote would come my way. We were on the bedroom filled second floor.

"Kyon-kun."

Tsuruya-san approached me with a smile.

"May I sleep with your sister? To be honest, we don't have enough rooms. I could open up the room that I used when I was a kid to her, but if she sleeps alone wouldn't she be lonely?"

"It's fine for her to share a room with me."

Haruhi suddenly peeked her head over.

"I looked at the room; the bed is huge. Having three sleeping in files is not a problem. No matter how you put it, girls sleeping with girls is more healthy."

What healthy? Having my sister in my room… As if I would do anything to her. I might go down the slippery slope if I am to share a room with Asahina-san. Whether it'd be my sister or Shamisen is really of no difference to me.

"Oy, what then?"

Haruhi asked my little ol' sis who placed Shamisen on her shoulder. She giggled and answered without a giving a damn about the general mood:

"I want to sleep with Mikuru-oneechan!"

My sister sneaked her way into Asahina-san's room just like that and left Shamisen with me. I set out to offer the others a rare chance to spend the night with this bright feline –

"Thank you for your goodwill, but I have not the patience to take care of a talking cat."

Koizumi hit me with a soft nail while Nagato stared at the eyelashes of the calico for about thirty seconds –

"No need."

With that short answer, she promptly turned around and left.

Fine, letting him roam the premises didn't seem to hurt. Although in foreign territory, Shamisen acted no differently than at home, as he jumped right into bed and started snoring. He'd been sleeping for so long in the train already. I would've loved to lie down myself, but Haruhi spared no time for rest, so one had to follow the orders of the day and gather around downstairs.

"Good! Let's go! Off to ski!"

I think this was getting ahead of ourselves, but Haruhi would not waste even a second while being on the burning edge. With the energetic Tsuruya-san stoking the fire, Haruhi might just double her speed with the even more hyper Tsuruya-san by her side. Ski outfits and the skis were rented elsewhere by Koizumi. It was unbelievable how he had obtained our exact measurements. There was even one for my little sister who came at the last moment and it was a snug fit for her. I could almost picture spies of the 'Organization' (in black suits and dark shades) sneaking into North high and the elementary that my sister attends and raiding the clinic room for the check-up records. Hmm, I should ask about Asahina-san's measurements from him one of these days. This is for no other reason but pure curiosity.

"I have not skied for some time. Ever since the get-together in my elementary days I have had no chance at it. It's all because it doesn't snow where we live. There's gotta be snow in winter to really get the mood going!"

The utterance of a brat that knows not of the perils of snowy fields. There are plenty of people who detest snow. From what I can conclude, Uesugi Kenshin of the warring states was one such individual.

Laden with boots and with skis on our backs, we finally marched our way into the grand ski slopes. Like Haruhi, I hadn't had a chance to ski for some time. The last time would've been in my junior days. This would be a first for my sister and, apparently, the same for Asahina-san as well. I am positive that Nagato had never experienced this, but my educated guess is that she would rival any professional the moment she hit the slopes. The scattered flags of various color that were the ski jackets entered my view as we ascended the lift, which made me realize just how few people there were compared to my own imagination, and Tsuruya-san started to explain:

"This is a hideaway that is known only to a few; a secret skiing ground known only to experts. That is because this had been a private skiing area until only a decade ago."

Although it had since then been open to the general public, Tsuruya-san's supplemental showed no air of prejudice. There exist people like that in this world, having good looks, great personality, great financial situation, good background, and are essentially helplessly flawless. Haruhi remarked as she put her skis onto her boots:

"What to do, Kyon? I would like to go to the expert trail straight away, but does everyone know how to ski? How about you?"

"Let us get some practice."

I looked at my little sister and Asahina-san, who after having the skis put onto their boots, were tripping after going a distance no greater than thirty centimeters on them, and promptly answered Haruhi.

"If you don't teach them even the basics, never mind the expert trail, just getting onto the chair lifts will take forever."

Asahina-san, who had snow all over her from falling into the ground, was a natural as a skiing gear model. I thought occasionally about whether or not anything existed in this world that would not go well with her?

"Let's do this! I will train Mikuru, Imouto-chan will go with Haruhi-nyan. As for Kyon-kun and the rest, think of something on your own."

Tsuruya-san's proposal could not have come at a better time. I needed some time to get used to the feel of being on skis. As I gave a passing glance off to the side…

"…"

The absolutely emotionless Nagato, with poles in hands, had already taken off smoothly. In the end, my sister didn't learn anything. Was Haruhi's teaching method flawed?

"Put your feet together, and push hard on the poles, zoom and you are on your way, and just keep going ahead on full steam, and also stop on full steam. All right! Now you're all set to go!"

More like inching bit by bit. If running on full steam was all you needed, then the first hybrid car would actually stand a chance of being rolled out. Regrettably, my sister's efforts on full steam only extended her endurance from thirty centimeters to three meters before she crashed into the ground. However she enjoyed herself as she shouted and fell and ate snow. No matter the outcome, this is a healthy form of relaxation. Although one should beware of getting a stomachache from this and getting too carried away.

Now, on the other hand, either Asahina-san has talent or Tsuruya-san is just a great instructor, since Asahina-san had mastered skiing in a matter of thirty minutes.

"Wa, wa! This is fun! Wa! This is great!"

In the pure white backdrop, the visage of a smiling Asahina-san skiing was, to summarize and to cut short my comments, like a superbly crafted rendition of a snow fairy, as dazzling as a piece of art. Just seeing this beauty was enough for me should I be sent packing right after this. Before that however, it's picture time.

Haruhi took a snipe at Koizumi and I who were practicing by ourselves, and looked on at my sister who made no progress. From her looks, she seemed to convey that she wished to hit the hilltop and get a shot at descent, but there was no way to take the fifth grader along. Tsuruya-san must have seen through her, which is why she said:

"Haruhi-nyan! You all go on ahead and take the lift!"

Tsuruya-san fell but was laughing heartily as she dug my sister out in haste.

"I will teach Imouto-kuntu! Either that or I'll build a snowman with her, or ride a sled even. It's just a matter of renting a sled."

"Really?"

Haruhi looked on at my sister and Tsuruya-san, as she thanked her.

"Thank you so much~ Sorry~"

"No biggie no biggie~ Come, Imouto-kuntu! Would you like skiing lessons, snowman making, or riding on a sled?"

"Snowman!"

My little sister loudly replied as Tsuruya unloaded her skiing gear.

“Okay, snowman it is. Let’s make him a big one, all right?”

Looking at the two as they proceeded with making a snowball, Asahina-san said enviously:

“Snowman… I want to stay behind and build a snowman…”

“No way.”

Haruhi quickly arrested Asahina-san’s arm, and said with all smiles:

“We’re heading to the top of the hill, and we will go up against each other. The first to reach the foothill will be granted the title of General Winter by me. Do your best!”

That brat would no doubt call it quits only when she emerged as the victor. No matter, but to challenge the summit right off the bat did make me somewhat scared. It is better to take things one at a time. Haruhi held her nose high and scoffed.

“Wuss. To really have fun in skiing, you should head straight for the top!”

Although she might have said that, she still opted for my suggestion, which is a rarity. We decided to tackle the intermediate level slope first, and save the main event of the day, the expert level trail, for the last challenge.

“Let’s get on the lifts. Yuki, we’re going! Get over here!”

Nagato, who was going in wide arcs around us, hurried to our position when Haruhi sounded off, and stopped right next to me.

“We’re going against each other! Compete! I’ve got enough free lift vouchers to last us till sundown… No! Even at dusk, we’ll still be able to take the lift! OK, come with me!” I would have done so without you hollering about. Besides, even if I declared my intent to join the snowman building class, you would’ve vetoed it. Let’s not talk about Koizumi, for just having

Nagato and Asahina-san giving Haruhi free reign to do whatever she desires, I’d say never mind blizzards, even the return of the glacial age was not out of the picture. As such, not having an open-minded man of ethics just wouldn’t do. I wasn’t sure if I had the open mind to look at all the greats in our midst, and Koizumi would have a field day as he came up with several rebuttals against me. So I didn’t care anymore. That was, because none of this really mattered now. The entire brigade stood energetically. The snow was powder snow, the clear bright sky was a shade of cyan. The chief, with an expression as clear as the sky above her, extended her hand.

“The chairs are twin-seaters, so for fairness, let’s RPS over them!”

Up next…

Absolutely nothing worth mentioning. My sister and Tsuruya-san decided to stay behind to do individual activities, as the regular members of the SOS Brigade were slowing going up through the lifts, and enjoying simple skiing thrills. The moment we skied down to the foothill, the shape of the snowman became more pronounced, with Tsuruya-san and my sister really enjoying themselves as if they were the same age. Whether it was putting on the bucket, or installing a nose, they were lost in the act. Soon after, they started on a second snowman. This would be the most recent scene of them in my memory. Or, perhaps the last memory of them for that matter. How many turns of the skiing tournament had it been by now?

After descending from the mountain with no mishap, somehow… We really paid no heed of the time. Just out of the blue, almost suddenly, we found ourselves in the thick of a storm. Only a vision of white was before us, and anything beyond a meter fell out of our vision. The gusting storm mixed with snow fragments pounded on us. The pain was more pronounced than the cold. Our exposed faces quickly become frozen. We could only breathe normally by facing down; that was how strong a blizzard we found ourselves in. There really was no prior warning.

Haruhi in the lead came to a stop, and Nagato who was against her also came to a screeching halt, while Asahina-san and I caught up, with Koizumi bringing up the rear we were already surrounded in this blizzard. It is almost as if it were summoned by somebody out there.

…

……

……

End flashback. Now do you see why we are in such a grievous situation over this snow mountain?

The visibility is simply too poor, and should there be a cliff a couple of meters away, we might fall and meet our demise if not careful. There really shouldn't be a cliff, but it would not be surprising if something unidentified on the map appeared before us. This ski retreat has no jumping platform, not that I want to challenge the large hill. To say fall would be exaggerating things, but we might knock our nasal bridges out if we come into direct conflict against trees camouflaged in white.

"Where are we right now?"

I feel rather dismayed having to rely on Nagato at this hour, but nothing is more important than our lives. But we are in a situation where Nagato is unable to pilot us after hours of trekking about and we are still stuck at square one.

"This is odd."

Even Haruhi's grumbles bear the scent of confusion.

“Just what is going on? How can it be that we don’t even see a shadow of a person? This is way

too bizarre. How long have we been walking?”

She looks toward Nagato in the lead, as Nagato shows an expression that looks to be wondering whether or not she has taken the wrong path down the mountain somehow. This matter will have to be left at that for now. This is not some wonderland. So long as we grasp our rough bearings, we should naturally reach the base of the mountain as we head downward along the slope. The problem is that we can’t get to that point for some reason, talk about weird.

“We have no choice, let’s dig a hole in the snow and set up camp. Keep going when the storm

dies down.”

“Wait.”

I call Haruhi off, as I head to Nagato who seems to be brushing the snow aside.

“Just what is going on?”

The young girl with a poker face, with her short hair stiffened from the freezing air lifts her head towards me slowly.

“An incomprehensible event has occurred.”

She quietly says. Those dark irises look at me in earnest.

“If the dimensional coordinates that I recognize are correct, our current whereabouts should have exceeded the point of origin.”

What and what? If that is so we should have landed in the midst of human life signs. But even after all that walking, we fail to run into the lift cables or even any cabin.

“An event that is beyond the control of my dimensional manipulation abilities has occurred.”

Hearing the chilling voice of Nagato, I take a deep breath. Words vanish from the edge of my mouth just as how snowflake evaporates in an instant upon contacting the tip of the tongue. Event beyond Nagato’s abilities to control? Are the strange premonitions directed at this?

“Who could’ve done it this time around?”

Nagato falls into silence, without blinking her eyes as the snowflakes dance wildly and blow straight at her.

None of us has a watch with us, nor do we have a cellular phone when we rushed to the ski grounds, so nobody really knows the time. We only know that we left the villa at approximately

three o'clock in the afternoon. But we are sure that we have been out for some time. The cloudy sky still has some glimmer of light, but the thick cloud and the blizzard covers prevent us from seeing where the sun is. It is about as bright as a moss-filled cave. A strange taste of rust gushes out from the depths of my wisdom tooth and a slight pain starts up.

We can't seem to get out of this wall of snow, and a uniform grey covers the sky. It is not as if I haven't experienced this somewhere before. Could it be that –

"Ahh!"

Haruhi who is standing next to me suddenly exclaims. I am shocked to the point that my heart was about to jump out of me, going right through my ribs.

"Oy! Don't go around scaring people like that! What are you doing shouting out of the blue like that for?!"

"Kyon, look at that!"

Haruhi points her fingertip, and utterly fearless over the strong winds—A dim glow is ahead.

"What is that?"

I gaze into that light. Due to the tempest, the glow fades in and out, but the source remains consistent. It is similar to the dim glows of the fireflies after they mate.

"That light's coming from a window!"

Haruhi's tone is filled with a sense of exhilaration.

"There must be a house over there! Let's go and take a look. We will freeze to death if we stay any longer."

Staying still, we will perish as she just said. Although… a house? Can there be a house in such a desolate place?

"Over here over here! Mikuru-chan, Koizumi-kun! Everyone keep following me!"

Haruhi becomes a human plowing machine, and valiantly opens a path for us up front. Frigidity, anxiety and exhaustion make Asahina-san's body tremble. Koizumi follows Haruhi while holding her. The lines that he spewed forth as he went past me chills my heart to the bottom of the pit.

"This is definitely an artificial light. However I am very certain that there was no light coming from this direction before, since I have been monitoring the situation nearby."

"…"

Nagato and I utter no word, as we stare at the back of Haruhi who is using her skis to shovel the snow away.

“Hurry up! Kyon, Yuki! Don’t get left behind!”

There remains no other alternative. Rather than having our frozen corpse becoming the news headline a century later, I would gamble on this seemingly slim chance of survival. Even if it’s a trap set in advance, we have no choice at this point. I push on Nagato’s back, as I head along the path in the snow that Haruhi has opened up. The closer we get, the brighter the light becomes. Haruhi’s better than 20/20 vision is no joke. This is definitely an indoor light permeating from the window.

“It’s a mansion! And a large one…”

Haruhi stopped in her footsteps, shot her head straight up, and after having expressed her thoughts, kept going.

I stare at the massive structure, and my darkened mood sinks some more. In a backdrop composed of the silvery white snow and the pencil grey sky, it stands like a house in a shadow play, making it all the more uninviting. It isn’t so much that its appearance is not commonly seen. To call it a villa, well it stands as grand as a castle. Several towers of unknown purpose protrude from the roof, and though it could be due to inadequate lighting, they look very dark. To have such a structure within the snow mountain is the very definition of bizarre. If not, then all the dictionaries of the world should have to be rewritten with the new definition of the word.

The location is a snow mountain clouded by a blizzard. The cast is us who are in distress. Finding a dim light while we are lost on the way, and stumbling upon a strange mansion after following that light –

Only one ingredient is left. Would what comes next be the appearance of the owner of the house, being even more peculiar than the mansion, or even some alien monster? Would the story head into suspense, mystery or horror?

“Hello –”

Haruhi quickly faces the portal, and projects her voice. The door has no intercom nor does it have a doorbell. Haruhi’s fist knocks on the inelegant door.

“Is anyone there!?”

I give the mansion another look, while standing behind Haruhi. It is not that I’m cynical, but this setting is just too well prepared, as if it was custom-made for us. However, I am aware that this couldn’t be the work of Koizumi. It’ll be great if the moment that door opens, Arakawa-san as well as Mori-san are there to greet us … but even Nagato has said that the current situation is beyond her, proving that this can’t possibly be the doing of Koizumi, as I don’t think Koizumi

can fool Nagato. Even if he had Nagato in it, and got her to be part of the surprise, Nagato would not have lied to me. Haruhi yells out with a booming voice comparable to this tempest:

“We’re lost! Would you please let us rest inside? We are trapped in the snow and are about to die!”

I turned my back to verify that everyone’s still on board. Nagato looks at Haruhi’s back with her typical marionette expression. Asahina-san is hugging her own body for warmth with a panicked face, occasionally letting loose a cute sneeze and wiping her entirely red nose. Koizumi’s signature smile has vanished. His arms are crossed like he is deep in thought, with his head cocked on an angle. His expression is as if he has tasted something bitter. He looks as the indecisive Hamlet might, pondering whether or not one should open the door. Haruhi’s noise level is so high that should she be doing this close to my home, the neighbors would be up in arms. The question is that there is no answer so far.

“Is nobody home?”

Haruhi, with her gloves removed and blowing steam at her fists says resentfully:

“There are lights inside, so I thought there’d be people inside… Kyon, what’s next?”

I can’t give you an answer just like that even if you ask for one. Only some hot-blooded hero that would do whatever comes into his head would rush headlong into this place shrouded by mystery.

“It’ll do if we can find a place to use as shelter… is there a garage or a shack nearby?”

However, Haruhi opts not for such distractions as trying to find shelter. She puts on her gloves before us, grabs onto the handle that has accumulated ice on it, and lets go of a breath that looks like a prayer. With a serious expression, she slowly turns the handle. Maybe I should stop her. At least, after hearing Nagato’s advice, I should have some idea about what’s ahead. But it’s too late now — it is as if the mansion is opening its mouth.

The door is open.

Artificial lighting lit up our faces.

“So it’s unlocked. Would it kill them to get the door if somebody’s in the house?”

Haruhi storms in at the lead as she puts the skis and the poles off to the side on the wall.

“Anyone? Is there anyone here? Sorry for the intrusion!”

What can you do? We can only mimic what the chief does. Koizumi, the last in, shuts the door, and we are finally able to bid a temporary farewell to the hours of cold and the piercing sounds of the gale, so we can rest easy.

“Hoo-!”

Asahina-san lands right on the ground.

“Hello! Is anyone there–?!”

The boisterous shouts of Haruhi ring next to my ear, as the warmth and the brightness of the house sink into my bones. It is like the feeling one gets from taking a hot shower after coming back into the house deep in winter. The snow accumulated on our jackets as well as our heads quickly turns into droplets that drip onto the ground. The heating must be on pretty high here. Strangely, there is nobody in the house. It should be about time that someone comes out to express how they are disrupted by Haruhi and sends her out of here, but there remains no reply to Haruhi’s calls.

“Would this be a haunted house?”

I mutter as I look around the house. The hall comes up the moment one steps through the double door. Is it easier to say that it’s like the lobby of a high-class hotel? The ceilings are quite high, with a large chandelier that hangs above for illumination. The floor is covered with a deep red carpet. The exterior might look like some haunted castle, but the inside is fairly modern. An impressive elevator that leads to the second floor is right in the centre of the hall. If there were a coatroom nearby, I might mistakenly call it the ground floor of a hotel.

“I’ll go take a look.”

The absent house owner has got onto Haruhi’s nerves. She rids herself of the ski jacket as if shedding her skin, and kicks her boots away.

“Can’t worry so much since this is an emergency, but I wouldn’t want to get grilled for trespassing on private property. I will go and see if anyone’s here. All of you wait here.”

As expected of the chief, having made a statement befitting a leader. Just as Haruhi is about to take off, with only her socks on —

“Hold it.”

I called to her.

“I’ll go with you. God forbid if you go alone and do something totally out of line.”

I take off my boots and jacket in haste. My body instantly becomes more agile. All the fatigue from having been lost in the snow mountain clouded by the storm has seemingly vanished. I push the heavy clothing aside.

“Koizumi, take care of Asahina-san and Nagato in the meantime.”

A contorted smile appears on face of the esper guy who can’t help us out of the snow mountain at all, and he nods lightly. I look at the worried expression of Asahina-san, and glance at Nagato who is standing still.

“Let’s go. This place is huge, the owners might be deep inside which is why they didn’t hear you roaring.”

“When is it ever up to you to call the shots? In times like this only I give out the orders! Do as I tell you to do!”

The sharp-tongued Haruhi flaunts her power, grabs my wrist, and says to the three on stand by:

“We’ll be back in no time. Koizumi-kun, take care of the two of them.”

“Understood.”

Koizumi replied to Haruhi with his everyday smile, and nodded his head to me. I guess that guy must be thinking the same thing that I am. There is not a ghost of a person to be found even after scouring all the corners of this house. For some reason, I just feel that way.

Haruhi decides to explore the upper level first. Just walking up the grand staircase, long corridors to our left and right open themselves up, and the walls of the two corridors have countless wooden doors. We decided to open one such door, and it opened with ease. A tidy European bedroom lay within.

There appear to be stairs at the end of each corridor, and we walk up, of course following wherever Haruhi decides to go.

“There, after that go this way.”

Haruhi points to the headings with one hand, and using the other to pull on my wrist. Every time we hit a new level, she shouts out: “Is anyone there?” The volume is so loud that I am tempted to cover my ears, but I can’t even do that, so all that I do is what Haruhi tells me, and tag along with her.

Because there is an uncountable number of rooms, we can only randomly open some of the doors to peek inside. When we verified the same kind of bedroom, we are at the fourth floor. Are the night lamps always on in the corridors? Each and every level seems to be brightly lit. Which door to open next? As I was taking my pick –

“This reminds me of that time in summer when we went outside to see if the boat was still there.”

… Hmm, such a thing did happen. During that time, I was dragged by Haruhi as I am now and ran while it was pouring down.

As I turned the dark brown films of my memory, Haruhi suddenly stops, and as she holds me by the wrist I come to a stop as well.

“Well I…”

Haruhi proceeds quietly:

“…Can’t remember when this started… I started to try to choose the road less traveled whenever possible all the time. Ahh, I don’t mean typical road when I say road, but instead it’s like the one with a direction or a heading, such as the road of survival for example.”

“Oh.” I pay lip service. So? What about it?

“Therefore, I would take a different path from everyone else right from the start, that way I would have a different experience from everyone else, given that the typical choice tends to be rather boring. Why it is that people would decide on dull things is beyond me. Subsequently, I found out something. As long as I start to make different choices from most people right off the bat, I would have interesting things awaiting me to discover.”

The born rebel would take the other path just because of things being too mainstream, choosing the alternative without considering the risk-benefit. I have that inclination myself, so it is not as if I don’t understand what Haruhi is suggesting. However, I think you are a bit too extreme, and are operating beyond the level of what is reasonable. Haruhi gives a Mona Lisa smile back.

“Nevermind, it’s nothing serious.”

What! This clearly doesn’t need my reply, so don’t bother asking in the first place! Would you look at our situation! This isn’t the time to joke about and take it easy!

“Although, something has been on my mind.”

“What is it this time?”

I asked impatiently.

“What’s with you and Yuki?”

…

Haruhi doesn’t look at me, and stares ahead at the corridor. My response is off by a beat.

"… What are you saying? Nothing's going on between me and her."

"Liar. I can see that you've been paying attention to Yuki ever since Christmas Eve. Every time I look at you, you've been looking at Yuki."

Haruhi still stares ahead.

"It's not because you hit your head or something? Or is it that you're plotting something for Yuki?"

I don't feel that I have been staring at Nagato excessively. The ratio compared to looking at Asahina-san should be at best 6:4… but now's not the time to say that!

"As if…"

Cat got my tongue. Ever since the event of the disappearance, just as claimed by Haruhi, I have paid a bit more attention to Nagato. I feel somewhat uncomfortable about this, which is why I am denying it. But I didn't anticipate that Haruhi would notice, so I never came up with a script to use. That, and it's not as if I can tell her the truth.

"Say it!"

Haruhi pronounces each word distinctly.

"Yuki has changed somewhat. Although she looks the same as ever, I just know. Something has happened between you and Yuki, right?"

Just in the space of two to three sentences, we went from 'ill intent' to 'set in stone'. If we let her keep going at this rate, by the time we get back to Koizumi and the gang, it will have become 'for real' between Nagato and me. It is true that something did happen between us, so it's hard to outright deny this charge, to think about it all of a sudden.

"Eh… um… well…"

"Don't try to weasel your way out! You lowlife scum!"

"No! We didn't do anything shady! It's just that, just… actually…"

Haruhi's expression looks more and more like a hawk's eye aiming at a target.

"Actually what?"

I manage to squeeze my words out with great difficulty with Haruhi's provocative glares fixed on me.

"Nagato has had some troubles. Yea, that's it. She came to me to talk about it."

To think at the same moment that you speak is quite a chore. It gets harder if you have to make up lies on the spot.

“Actually, her problems aren’t over yet. How should I put it… it’s like… basically this is up to Nagato to resolve. I can only listen, and how to do it is also something that Nagato has to decide. Nagato has not told me what she will do, so of course I am worried, and maybe that’s why I would look at her occasionally.”

“What’s Yuki have to worry about? Why would she go to you? Talking to me is alright too!”

She still sounds skeptical.

“I do not think that Yuki would find you to be more reliable than myself or Koizumi.”

“Basically anyone other than you is fine for Nagato to talk to.”

My free hand caught Haruhi whose eyebrow was way up high, and my brain finally resumed its free thinking.

“It’s really like that. Do you know why Nagato has to live alone?”

“Family reasons? I don’t like poking my nose into private matters, so I don’t know for sure.”

“There’s been changes to her family situation. Depending on the outcome, Nagato might have to end her days of living alone, renting her apartment.”

“Just what’s going on?”

“To put it simply, she might have to move. Leave that luxury condo and move to some place far away… maybe to a relative’s place. Of course, that would have an impact on schooling, as she would need to transfer. She might have to go to another school by next spring when we head off to our sophomore year…

“Really?”

Haruhi’s eyebrows have lowered, so just a little bit more would do.

“Really. But no matter what her parents have said, she doesn’t want to transfer out. She wants to stay at North High until graduation.”

“So she’s worried over this…”

Haruhi lowered her head for some time, but she faces me with anger when she lifts it up:

“That’s all the more reason to tell me about it! Yuki’s an important brigade member, I wouldn’t allow her to leave on her own!”

I am satisfied the moment I hear her say that.

“Talk to you… You would just blow this thing out of proportion. You would probably run off to her relatives’ home and protest to them about Nagato transferring out.”

“That’s true.”

“Nagato has had her mind made up about solving this on her own. Although she might be a bit puzzled, her heart lies with that clubroom. To keep dwelling on it is quite an emotional burden, so she decided to talk to me about it. I was hospitalized at the time, so she told me when she visited alone. It’s just that there was nobody but me over there.”

“So that’s it…”

Haruhi sighed lightly.

“So Yuki worries about such things…? She looks to be happy lately so I can’t tell. Before vacation, I saw peons of the Denkensha giving her a full ninety degree bow. She didn’t seem to mind it…”

I try as hard as I might to picture what Nagato not minding that would look like, but I simply cannot, so I shake it off. Just then Haruhi suddenly lifts her head and says:

“But, hmm, never mind. That does sound like what Yuki would do.”

Looks like she bought it. I let out the air in me. Just what part of this little serenade sounds like something that Nagato would do? Even I find it unbelievable. I should wrap this up given that Haruhi seems to have concluded that Nagato is that kind of a girl.

“Don’t leak this out to other people, and most definitely not to Nagato. Don’t worry, she’ll still be sitting in the clubroom and reading her books come next year.”

“Of course, or I wouldn’t leave it at that!”

“But…”

I, whose wrist burns from Haruhi’s steel grip, offer this supplemental explanation.

“In case, just in case, if Nagato still has to transfer or is taken away by force, you can make as much of a ruckus as you like and I will stick with you all the way.”

Haruhi stares at me with soft eyes and blinks twice, following this with a wide open smile and says:

“Of course!”

By the time we returned to the main hall on the first floor, the three that were left behind had taken their jackets off, and they greet us with varying looks. For some reason, Asahina-san still seems as if she is almost in tears.

“Kyon-kun, Suzumiya-san… you are back, finally…”

“Why are you crying, Mikuru-chan. Didn’t I say that we’ll be back in no time?”

Haruhi happily comforts Asahina-san, and touches her fine hair, while Koizumi gives me a most distracting expression. Just what is that look trying to say? Making a pass with that kind of stare is useless, it just won’t reach my heart try as you might.

The lone Nagato just stands there, looking directly at Haruhi with those dark pupils. She looks even more inanimate than usual. Even for an alien-made organic life form, having to go around in all that snow like a snow blower might be too taxing. I explain it this way so that I can comprehend it myself. Nagato is not a perfect individual. I thoroughly understood this point by now.

“There is something that I need to tell you…”

Koizumi approaches nonchalantly to my ear.

“But you must keep this from Suzumiya-san.”

Since he puts it this way, I better hear this out.

“How long do you think that you and Suzumiya-san have been gone for?”

“Should be no more than thirty minutes.”

Even though I heard Haruhi ramble on about rubbish and had to lie to her, I felt as though we were only gone for that long.

“I knew that you would say that.”

Koizumi sounds puzzled yet somewhat satisfied.

“For us who stayed behind, three hours have passed from when you and Suzumiya-san set out exploring to the point that you came back.”

Nagato was the timekeeper, said Koizumi.

“Mikuru-chan is upset because you have taken too long.”

The guy brushes some of his dried fringe aside, and goes on with a smile:

“That is why I decided to carry out an experiment. I asked Nagato-san to head off to a corner where we cannot see her, and asked her to time herself for ten minutes before she returned.”

Nagato did so with no objection. She headed off to the passageway off to the side of the hall, and disappeared at the corner –

“However, before I had even counted up to two hundred, Nagato-san had returned. I cannot help but wonder, since I felt as if that she had only been gone for about three minutes, but Nagato-san did in fact clock herself at ten minutes.”

Nagato can’t possibly have been mistaken. Could it be that you either fell asleep, or rounded off incorrectly?

“Asahina-san was counting quietly with me, and got around the same result.”

Is that so… I still feel that Nagato’s figures would be more precise.

“Not even I doubt the precision of Nagato-san. She cannot make an error with simple counting.”

What then? The world is like that.

“I suspect that the flow of time within this mansion varies depending on the location… or that the perceptual time of each of us and the general time have a discrepancy. I cannot say which is more correct… it could be that both are valid.”

Koizumi looks at Haruhi who is comforting Asahina-san happily with a brash manner, and at me.

“It would be best to move as a group, for I fear this chronological quarrel might worsen. It is rather a relief if that is the scope of the matter, for there are means to compensate if time disruption applies only within this building. However, what if this chronological quarrel had occurred before we were lured into here? What do you have to say about that storm which came without warning, and the trip without ever reaching the destination that followed? What if we were pulled into another space-time then…”

I look at Asahina-san whose hair has been disheveled by Haruhi, and at Nagato. Her hairstyle, which was blown out of shape, has now dried and returned to normal, and even her complexion has returned to a white warmer than the white snow. I start to whisper to Koizumi.

“And then, you and Nagato and Asahina-san must have had a group meeting? Any results?”

“Asahina-san had nothing to offer.”

It is self-evident looking at her crying like that. The focus is now on that other person. Koizumi further lowers his voice.

“She said absolutely nothing. She went off without a word also when I asked for her help earlier, and remained silent when she returned. When I asked her if she really did measure for ten minutes, she responded only with a nod. Otherwise she has revealed no other opinion.”

Nagato continues to stare still at the red carpet. Her poker face is the same today as it was yesterday. Although I feel as if she is somehow dumbfounded… am I just thinking too much? Just as I am about to show some sign of concern toward Nagato –

“Kyon, what the hell are you doing? Hurry up and report to everyone!”

Haruhi, with piercing glare, talks about the result of the expedition:

“We came back after going around once, and it’s all bedrooms from second floor and up. We thought that there’d be telephones…”

“Yes, but we found none.” I added. “In addition there is no television nor is there radio. We also didn’t see any telephone jacks or wireless equipment.”

“I see.”

Koizumi touches his chin with his fingertip.

“In other words, there is no channel to contact or to obtain information from the outside world.”

“At least for floor two and up.”

There is not a shred of anxiety in Haruhi’s smile:

“It’s fine if there’s something on the first floor, although is there any? This house is so big, there might be a room used specially for communication somewhere.”

Let us then set out to find it – Haruhi uses a hand signal instead of a flag sign, and pulls the concerned Asahina-san to her side. I followed after Koizumi and Nagato, and we walked out.

We settled in the dining room soon after. In a space furnished with antique style we found a luxurious, glittering, shining golden candelabra sitting atop a dining table with a white cloth cover over it. Such things are also seen in three-star hotel restaurants that I have never graced before so I know very little of them. Just look upward and there is another chandelier hanging from the ceiling, watching over the members of the SOS Brigade coldly.

“There really is no one else.”

Haruhi lifts a steaming teacup to her lips.

“Where did everybody go? Lighting and heating are still turned on. Talk about a waste of electricity. There’s no communication room. Why is that?”

The hot milk tea that Haruhi sips was just taken from the kitchen, which is of the same class as the ones in high-class restaurants along with the teacups and water bottles. While waiting for the water to boil, Asahina-san and Haruhi dug around and found glittering kitchen wares in a storage drawer that looks to be washed and dried. The extra large refrigerator houses quite a stock of food, making it hard to imagine that this is an abandoned house. It feels as if the moment we arrived, the inhabitants of the place just packed up and left. No, even that hypothesis has holes in it. For if that were true, then there should still be some sign of life in here.

"It almost mirrors the Mary Celeste."

Haruhi wanted to lighten the mood, but no avail.

The exploration of the first floor was carried out with all five of us. Walking in file, we opened up any door that we come across, and each time we found something we could use. There was the laundry room with a massive washing machine, an enormous bath the size of a bath house, and even a gaming room complete with billiard table, ping-pong table and an automatic Mahjong table… I only wish that the rooms over this corridor are not newly made space.

"There is another possibility…"

Koizumi puts the teacup on the saucer, and plays with the glimmering candelabra. I thought he wanted to claim it as his own, but after giving it a good appraisal, he placed it back where it was.

"The inhabitants of the mansion went off on a trip before the storm started, but cannot return under this inhospitable weather."

He shows a light smile, looks to be for the sake of Haruhi.

"If so, then they will return when the storm dies down. Hopefully they will put themselves into our shoes, and forgive us for rudely intruding upon their property."

"They definitely will, since we really have no place to go. Ahh, could it be that this mansion was set up as an emergency shelter for skiers like us who have lost their way? That would explain why there is nobody inside."

"What kind of emergency shelter would have no telephone?"

I sounded rather weary. We have accomplished so little after having all five of us heading door-to-door on this one floor. This building has no means to contact or to obtain information from the outside world, nor is there even a clock. But before all of this, I think that this mansion has clearly violated the building and fire codes.

"Who on earth would build such a large and unwieldy emergency shelter?"

“Maybe some national or municipal organization? Operating on the tax money of the people? Looking at it this way makes me feel justified drinking this black tea. I am paying tax after all. Mikuru-chan, give me a hand.”

“Eh? Ahh, okay.”

Asahina-san is dragged into the kitchen moments after throwing us a worried look. This is unfair for Asahina-san, but Koizumi’s time distortion theory upsets me, so having Haruhi out of sight cannot come at a better time.

“Nagato,” I say to the short-haired girl who is staring at the bottom of the chinaware off to the side.

“Just what is with this mansion? Where exactly are we?”

“This space is providing significant stress to me.”

She tossed such a sentence at me.

I don’t get it. What does that mean? Couldn’t you contact your maker or your patron, and ask for their help? This is an extraordinary situation. Is the occasional helping hand too much to give?

The face that finally turns my way still shows no sign of emotion.

“My connection to the Integrated Data Sentient Entity has been disrupted. Reason unknown.”

I didn’t understand it because she put it so lightly. After getting myself together, I ask yet again.

“… When did this happen?”

“From my own perspective time, as of six hours and thirteen minutes ago.”

It is hard to have that expressed in numerical terms with the sense of time lost. Just as I am pondering –

“Since the moment that we were plunged into the blizzard.”

The dark pupils are as still as before, but my heart is now brewing a torrent.

“Why did you not say anything at the time?”

I am not laying blame on her. Nagato’s spell of silence is her own personal trait. Better to say that she’s born with it rather than saying that she picked this up.

“So you mean, this place is not the real world? Not only just this mansion… but also the snow mountain that we cannot get away from. All of this is an alternate space created by someone out there?”

Nagato falls into silence for some time before saying:

“I don’t know.”

She sinks her head as if in defeat. I am somewhat anxious since this reminded me of Nagato that day. However, is there anything outside of Haruhi that could cause such an anomaly that not even this person could comprehend?

I look towards the ceiling, and ask another member of the SOS Brigade.

“What do you think? Anything to add?”

“Nagato-san’s comments aside, this anomaly is beyond my understanding.”

I pay some attention to the right honorable vice Brigade chief who is straightening himself a little:

“From what I know, this is not the enclosed space in prior cases. This is not a space created by the will of Suzumiya-san.”

You positive?

“Yes. You can call me an expert when it comes to the study of Suzumiya-san’s mental activities. If she had changed the physical world, I would definitely know. However, Suzumiya-san has done nothing of the sort this time, since she did not hope for such contingency to occur. I can guarantee that this is in no way related to her. Let’s bet on this if you want; no matter what you bet, I will double the wager.”

“Then who can it be?”

I feel a slight sense of chill. It might have been because of the storm, but the view from the dining room window is a uniform grey. Even if a neon blue ‘avatar’ suddenly takes a peek inside, it wouldn’t really clash with the background. Koizumi does a Nagato impression, and silently shrugs his shoulders. He doesn’t seem to be worried. It could just be his acting abilities at play though, since he doesn’t want to show his worried face to me.

“Sorry to keep you all waiting!”

Just then, Haruhi and Asahina-san carry a huge plate full of sandwiches toward us, as tall as a small mound.

My biological clock tells me that we have not been waiting for all that long. It must have been no longer than five minutes since Haruhi had dragged Asahina-san along into the kitchen. However when I ask Haruhi while acting as if nothing has happened, it turns out that it must have taken at least thirty minutes to make all those sandwiches. Judging from the results, I don't think she is exaggerating. Each individual toast had been toasted, the ham and the cabbage all had to be flavored, the eggs were sliced after being fully boiled, and mayonnaise was used to top it all off. Just preparing the ingredients alone would have consumed more than five minutes. Besides, given the quantity of the sandwiches made, no matter how much corners were cut, quite a commitment in time would have been needed nonetheless.

This is off topic, but I have to mention that the taste is pretty good. Of course, I had the chance to experience Haruhi's culinary skills in that Christmas stew already. Just what is this person not good at? Had I met her in elementary school, about the only subject that I could've trumped her at would be ethics maybe… I hit myself on the head. Now's not the time to think of such trivial things. The thing to really worry about is our current situation.

Asahina-san seems to be mindful of who is eating her works. Whenever I started grabbing a new sandwich, she would look on intensely with anticipation, and her facial expression would go from relaxed to tense intermittently. You can tell really easily that the one before would be Haruhi's and the one after it Asahina-san's. There is something that she doesn't know. I haven't even told Koizumi. Haruhi most definitely must not know.

Only Nagato and I are aware that there is something that I haven't done.

That's right —

I have yet to return to the past to save the world.

I thought initially that this was not a priority, and getting around to it after New Year's would be fine. The fact that I had to somehow break it to Asahina-san only made me delay further. So leaving it till the next year and forgetting about it just won't do? What if we can never escape from this estate…

"Wait, hold on."

This is odd. Nagato and I, along with Asahina-san definitely headed to the past sometime in the middle of December. How else do you account for me seeing those three that time? To put it another way, we definitely will return to our rightful space-time. Thinking like that gives me some assurance.

"Come, come, everybody dig in."

Haruhi grabs the sandwiches and stuffs her mouth full with them while gulping down black tea at the same time.

“There’s still plenty left, dig in, I can make whatever you guys want. There is more than enough food in the storage for us to go through.”

Koizumi gives an awkward smile as he enjoys a ham and pork chop sandwich.

“Delicious. Simply delicious. This is as good as the ones made in great restaurants.”

This exaggerated compliment is of course directed at Haruhi, although I don’t really worry about her. Nor am I worried about Asahina-san who can’t seem to enjoy the meal due to her guilty conscience acting up from using someone else’s stock.

“…”

Rather, it’s Nagato.

To take only one small bite after another is not her typical way. The ferocious appetite of the alien-made organize artificial intelligence robot is nowhere to be seen. The hand to mouth motion seems to have decreased by half at least.

After the scene degenerated to Haruhi and I going neck to neck to swipe the majority of the light meal—

“Off to bath.”

Haruhi’s sudden proposal meets no objection. It’s her nature to assume that no objection means outright approval from everyone.

“This bath is pretty big, but there’s no gender separation, so it’s a must that we take turns. As the chief, I cannot allow indecent acts to take place in the Brigade. Females first, any problem?”

Having no real clue what to do first makes having a person such as Haruhi directing everyone step by step a good thing. That way we can focus elsewhere. If one is stuck without a lead, we might as well move the body in a mechanical fashion to stimulate the brain. Who knows if sudden sparks of inspiration will appear. Here’s to my brain power.

“Before that, let’s decide on the rooms. Which one do you want? And yes they’re all the same.”

According to Koizumi’s hypothesis, it would be best to cram everyone into the same room, but if anyone even dares to propose such a thing, you can expect a straight punch from Haruhi coming right at you. Sometimes self-preservation comes first.

“It’s better for us to sleep in close proximity. Something like opposite or neighbouring rooms so long as we can get five of them.”

Having said these more serious words, Haruhi stands up.

“Well then, let’s sleep on the second floor.”

Haruhi walks out in broad steps, and we hurriedly follow. Before heading up we dumped the ski jackets left out in the hall into the dryer in the laundry room. Haruhi chose the five rooms closest to the staircase to address the matter of getting downstairs the moment that the owner of the estate returned. I sleep next to Koizumi, and the opposite rooms in order are taken up by Nagato, Haruhi and Asahina-san. Haruhi’s room is dead opposite mine.

The feel of the bedrooms remains the same as when Haruhi and I inspected them before. Each room has little furniture and it is just a place to crash. Even those cheap business suites have more furniture. Apart from an archaic dressing table, there are only curtains and a bed. The window is totally sealed shut. Look closely, and you’ll see that it’s a two layer type. Maybe that gives better sound insulation, since although horrendous weather brews outside, it remains quiet as a mouse inside, which actually gives a sense of suspense instead.

Since we have no personal luggage to sort through, we decided that after claiming the rooms, we should meet in the passageway paved with red carpet.

Haruhi speaks with a smile meant to provoke:

“Kyon, you know what?”

What do I know?

“Who are you kidding? You definitely can’t do the one thing that boys filled with worries would do in such a setting. I hate that mundane behavioural pattern.”

What should I do then?

“Therefore…”

Haruhi catches the arms of the two female members, leaning her head in right next to the hair on the side of the immobile Nagato, and lays everything out with a shout:

“Don’t peek!”

I left, more like slipped out from my room as soon as the group of three girls walked away, the jittery Haruhi amongst them. The air is warm and the passageway is dead quiet, unaffected by the blizzard outside, but my heart is anything but calm. I am not gratified by this warmth contrasting with the chill in my heart.

I tiptoe to the neighbouring room and knock on the door lightly.

"May I help you?"

Koizumi shows his face and unveils a welcoming smile. Just as he is about to speak, I put my index finger against my lips and he shuts his mouth in response. Without a word, I sneak into Koizumi's room. I actually would rather sneak into Asahina-san's room, but this is no time for that.

"There is something that I have to tell you first."

"Oh?"

Koizumi sits by his bed and signals me to take a seat as well.

"What might it be? I am curious. Is it something that must be kept from the other three?"

"Well Nagato getting wind of this is ok."

What is it? You still ask what it is about?

Of course it is about what happened from the point that Haruhi had vanished to when I woke up in the hospital ward. The revival of Asakura Ryouko, the second coming of Tanabata three years ago, the SOS Brigade members on totally tweaked settings, adult Asahina-san and the world resurrection project up ahead-

"This will take some time."

Koizumi is a great listener. Not only does he give me good feedback when I come to a pause, he also retains the attentiveness of a top student all the way until the end.

Since I only focus on the major points, it didn't take all that long for me to explain everything. I thought of going into grisly details for parts of the story, but with the concern of putting ease of understanding first, I opt for a compact summary.

Koizumi exclaims after having listened to everything.

"So that's it."

He doesn't seem to be particularly moved. I see him touching the side of his mouth with a finger.

“If everything that you have said is true, then I can only say that it is all very interesting.”

Are you trying to be courteous with that ‘interesting’?

“No, I really do think this way, for I thought of something in my mind as well. If you have experienced all those events, then my suspicion will have support.”

My facial expression should be along the lines of: “That’s not good. Just what on earth was it that he thought of?”

“I suppose that it has weakened.”

What is it?

“Suzumiya-san’s power. That and Nagato-san’s data manipulation ability.”

What are you talking about? I look at Koizumi. He shows that innocent smile of his.

“Suzumiya-san creating enclosed space has become less frequent, which I mentioned to you during Christmas. Almost in response to this, I feel that Nagato-san’s… how do I put it? That air of being alien? Such a feeling or sign seems to have drastically decreased.”

“…what?”

“Suzumiya-san is increasingly becoming more and more like an ordinary girl. As is Nagato-san, who is less and less like a terminal for the Integrated Data Sentient Entity.”

Koizumi looks at me.

“In my view, I cannot ask for a better development. If Suzumiya-san can come to terms with herself in reality, she would not need to think of things such as changing the world, which effectively will end my mission. It is also to my benefit should Nagato-san become an ordinary high school girl with no special power. As for Asahina-san… well, there is no difference to someone from the future no matter how things turn out.”

Koizumi continues with his monologue, as if I am not there.

“You have to return to the past to restore the world and yourself back to normal. That is because your past self witnessed your future self with Nagato-san and Asahina-san- is that correct?”

Aye.

“However we are now lost on this mountain covered up by a blizzard. We find ourselves inside this strange mansion that someone has gone to great lengths to prepare for us, locked inside an alternate space that not even Nagato-san can comprehend. If this state of being continues, all of you will never return to the past. Therefore, at least you, Nagato-san and Asahina-san must

return to normal space. No, it should be for certain that all of you returning to normal space is an established fact…"

It would be weird if it were not so. I am not in a state of panic because of that. During that time I most definitely heard my own voice. Although, if I have yet to return to that point in time, going back to the past must be something that will be done in the future. This indicates that we won't be stuck in this crazy house with the raging storm outside forever as a safe escape is firmly set in stone. To paraphrase Asahina-san (big): "or else, the current you would not be here."

"So that's it."

Koizumi repeats the same line, and smiles at me.

"However, I have other theories, but they are all pessimistic. To put it simply, they would be arguments which suggest that it doesn't matter even if we are never able to return to the original space-time."

Stop with going around in circles, get on with it.

After that lead-in, Koizumi lowers his voice carefully—

"Suppose that we right now are not the 'original us', and are mere duplicates that exist in an alternate world."

Koizumi keeps staring at me, as if waiting for me to digest those words. To be honest, I am having digestive problems.

"I will word it another way to make it easier for you to understand. Suppose our minds were copied as-is and pasted to a digital space, what would happen? Let's assume that only the minds were moved as-is to an imaginary reality.

"This is what you meant by duplicates?"

"Yes. Anything can be duplicated, not just the mind. It is possible at the Integrated Data Sentient Entity class level. In other words, we who are caught in this alternate space are not the originals, and are merely accurate copies made at some fixed time. And as for our originals… well, perhaps they are partying happily at Tsuruya-san's estate as we speak."

Wait a second. This has just gone way over my head. Could it just simply be that I lack knowledge?

"I don't think so. To give a better example. Suppose you are playing some video game, let's say one of those fantasy type RPG games. It would be smart to save progress before you enter a cave with god knows what inside it. Saving the game is an obvious thing to do. Even if the entire party gets wiped out by the monsters, you can restart from the save point. As long as you duplicate all data, you can keep the master copy safe and let the duplicate version of the Brigade

members take all the risk. Should something go wrong, pressing the Reset button will solve everything. Would you say that it is sensible to use this as a metaphor of our current situation?“

”Koizumi…“

A very intense sense of familiarity hits me the moment I let that out. Just like that feeling I experienced during that endless August with the sudden memory disconnect. What is it? I shout out in my mind for a memories which I should not recall. Come on! Hurry!

I hazily said:

”Have we experienced anything similar in the past?”

“You mean trapped in a snow mountain? No, not personally.”

“That’s not it.”

It’s not related to the snow mountain. I mean other than this encounter, I keep thinking that somewhere in my head there’s memories of us being tossed into other dimensions… and some place very unreal…

“You mean that time we took down the giant Cricket? That happened in an alternate space.”

“Not that one either.”

I keep wracking my brain and a barely visible watermark appears. There’s Koizumi in strange clothing, Haruhi, Nagato with Asahina-san, and lastly myself.

“Ahh there we go. Koizumi, for some reason, I keep thinking of you with a harp in hand and everybody being dressed in historical clothing and doing something…”

“Are you trying to say that you have retained memories of previous incarnations? I thought you didn’t believe in that.”

If there really is such a thing as reincarnation, people should be more understanding and would be more forgiving towards each other. That kind of stuff is just mere fantasy made for people that want to find an excuse to escape from the present reality.

“Exactly.”

Damnit. I can’t recall anything. My own logic dictates that I have no recollection of any alternate space, but my gut instincts deep inside tell me that is definitely not the case. What could it be, although I can only recall key words in fragments, there are fleeting visions such as kings, pirates and gunfights in a spaceship drifting about in my mind. Just what is with this? My memory tells me that there’s nothing of the sort, but what’s with these pieces that I can’t seem to piece together that are intertwined inside my heart? I can’t put the whole picture together.

Who knows how Koizumi interprets my puzzled appearance? He continues with a calm tone:

"If not even Nagato-san is able to interpret everything that has happened here, along with how this space is creating a burden to her, then it's basically not hard to conclude who the mastermind is, that has orchestrated this snow mountain disaster along with this mansion."

I can say nothing.

"It would have to be someone on the same level or surpassing Nagato-san."

"Who then?"

"I do not know, but, assuming the intent of the opponent is to force us into this crisis and make us stay put over here, Nagato-san would pose the greatest obstacle to that plan."

Koizumi touches his lower lip.

"Had I been that individual, I would target Nagato-san first, for she, unlike I who am powerless alone and unlike Asahina-san, Nagato-san is an alien android with direct connection to the Integrated Data Sentient Entity."

From that description, this person might be above Haruhi. Whether it'd be a person or a whole group, I have no idea at all. But Nagato did say that her connection with her boss had been disrupted.

"Perhaps the mastermind is far more powerful than even the creators of Nagato-san. If that is the case, than we are in effect already out of the game…"

Right in the middle of his speech, the young chap seems to think of something, and crosses his arms around his chest.

"You do recall Asakura Ryouko?"

I had almost forgotten, but the series of unforgettable events this month has jogged my memory.

"There exists a minority within the Integrated Data Sentient Entity who are radical elements. Just think, if they had a successful coup d'état, what might happen? From our point of view, they are omnipotent entities. To isolate Nagato-san and detain us in another world over in some other dimension would be a walk in the park for them."

I remember that sociable, outstanding and easy-going class rep, along with that sharp machete. I was attacked by her twice, and saved by Nagato twice.

"At any rate, this will not affect the outcome. If we cannot leave this mansion, we will have to stay here forever."

What? Is this Ryugu-jo?

“Bullseye. I can even say that we are being given the VIP treatment. Everything has been provided for. A comfortable mansion, fridge stuffed full of food, a bath house filled with hot water, comfortable bedrooms… just about everything is here save the necessities that can help us leave this house.”

That existence would be meaningless. I am not so disappointed at my life as to want to stay in this unknown space and enjoy a carefree life. It is just too short to call my high school life over in less than one year. Other than the people here, there are still others that I want to see again. It is just too tragic to be unable to see my family as well as Shamisen, and you can count Taniguchi and Kunikida in as well. To top it all off, I don’t like winter, sorry to the Icelanders, I don’t think that I can ever get used to having to spend my life in frigid ice and snow. Call me a man that craves the heat of summer and the noise of a cicada.

“I am much relieved hearing you say that.”

Koizumi sighs dramatically.

“The aftermath of Suzumiya-san releasing her power after realizing the problem in the situation is anyone’s guess. That might be the actual intent of the perpetrator. If there is no progress, one might as well put in some stimulus and provoke her into action. This is a common tactic. Should this really be a simulated environment, and if we are all mere duplicates of the original, the hidden hand would not need to be too reserved about anything. Very rarely do you see anyone having a sense of remorse from working video game characters to death. Aren’t you like that as well?”

Since he mentioned it, of course I don’t feel remorse. However, video game characters are just numbers, and I’d rather be a real character within the real world.

“The priority right now is to escape from here. It would be better to face disaster in the real world than to stay in this alternate space. There will be a way; no, rather we have to think of a way. Whoever it is that has Suzumiya-san and all of us trapped is evidently ‘our’ enemy. I do not mean ‘us’ as in the ‘Organization’ or the Integrated Data Sentient Entity, but rather the SOS Brigade.”

Whatever is fine. So long as you see eye to eye with me, I will see you as a brother.

After that, I embarked on some deep thinking. Koizumi joins me in thought as he lifts his chin with his hand. Soon after—

The sound of a light knock breaks the silence between me and Koizumi. I lifted my body, which was as heavy as if it were stuck to the bed by glue and opened the door.

“Umm… the bath is now empty. The two of you can use it now.”

Asahina-san's façade shows blushes that are just right for displaying a sense of sweetness and innocence. A strand of rinsed hair stuck to the side of the cheek stirs up affection, and the thigh exposed from the slightly long T-shirt is incredibly sexy. If my mental state were in its normal state, I would be thinking about taking her back to my room, putting her in a corner and enjoying the view.

"Where are Haruhi and Nagato?"

I gaze at the hallway, and Asahina-san smiles beautifully.

"They are drinking juice in the dining room."

Seeming aware of my thirsty eyes, she pulls on the hem of the T-shirt.

"Ahh, spare clothing is in the changing room. I got the T-shirt there. Towels and bathing necessities are all…"

It is hard to express the sense of beauty of her being so timid and embarrassed. I turn my head with a look to thwart Koizumi's moves, quickly move to the passageway and shut the door with my hand reversed.

"Asahina-san, I have a question."

"What is it?"

Those round, large eyes look up at me as her head leans off to a side with uncertainty.

"What do you have to say about this mansion? I find it odd, how about you?"

Asahina-san blinks her long and thick eyelashes and answers thusly:

"Umm, Suzumiya-san thinks that this is a part of Koizumi-san's detective game… what is it called? Yes, something like a prelude. That's what she said in the bedroom."

It's for the best if Haruhi can think of it like that, although it will be problematic if Asahina-san also sees it that way.

"How then can you account for the irregularity in the flow of time? You witnessed Koizumi's experiment firsthand didn't you?"

"Yes. But that's a part of the plan… right? Or is it not?"

I press on my forehead, trying to hold off my sigh. I really don't know if Koizumi is that capable, but if even time dilation is a part of the whole setup, it would be too unfair not to give an advanced warning to Haruhi. Besides, isn't time the expertise of Asahina-san? I decide to take a shot at it.

“Asahina-san, can you contact the future? Right now, right here?”

“Ehh?”

The puzzled childish face of the upperclassman looks at me.

“How can I tell such things to you ? Huhu. That’s classified information!”

She chuckles as if she finds it funny, but I am not joking nor do I find it funny. However Asahina-san keeps laughing.

“Enough of this, just go and take a bath, or else Suzumiya-san will get angry again. Hoho.”

With footsteps as light as butterflies flying about in a field of rapeseed flowers in springtime, the diminutive upperclassman drifts toward the stairs, and disappears after turning her head over and tossing an unnatural, enchanting look at me.

No good. Asahina-san cannot be depended upon. The only reliable one is…

“Dammit!”

I sighed towards the carpet. I really don’t want to put additional stress on her right now. As luck would have it though, she is the only one that can turn things around for us. Koizumi’s guesses are all just playing armchair strategist and who knows what kind of chaos Haruhi would unleash with her ways. Even if I were to hold the trump card, after all that horror talk that Koizumi gave me, I wouldn’t act recklessly. It could well have been that the individual that had set us up in this situation had already anticipated this.

“What to do now…?”

I was banking on being able to come up with some good idea after taking a bath and improving my blood circulation, but my brain knows itself best. Even if I squeeze at it, not even half of an idea that might turn things around will come out. That is just a no-brainer. I don’t feel discouraged, but it’s kind of sad now that I think about it.

Just as Asahina-san had said, the changing room has towels and spares ready. Elastic pants and T-shirts were lined up on the racks nearby. I put on a random set, and headed to the dining room with Koizumi.

The three that bathed beforehand had placed a whole row of juice jugs on the dining table and have been waiting for us.

“So slow, why the hell did you all take so long?”

To me, that was only a little longer than the time a crow might take in the bath. I sip on the orange juice that Haruhi handed over, and my vision is directed not at Nagato, but outside the window. Perhaps because her body has warmed up, Haruhi is chugging at the canned juice happily with her good index finger shooting upward, Asahina-san has a smile from being oblivious to the current situation, while Koizumi who clearly understands everything does the

same. Nagato seems even more minute than usual, could it be because her wet hair is hanging downward in a straight fashion?

Although just what time is it right now? The view outside the window is still a snowstorm as before, but it seems gloomy and not pitch black, which gives me the chills. Haruhi seems to have lost the sense of time.

“Let’s go and play in the gaming room.”

Still in the mood to play.

“Even Karaoke is fine, but we haven’t played Mahjong for such a long time. The bet is three times the number of tiles, and anything goes, but I want to do major tiles, so there’s no need to chip or to add points. We will decide based on the final points. Kokushi Shisan-men and Suankou Tanki on yakuman alright?” (note: Japanese Mahjong terminologies are unique)

Although I don’t want to complain about the rules of the game, I still slowly shake my head. Right now, what must be done isn’t Karaoke, nor is it to bet on Mahjong, but to think.

“I say that we should get some shut-eye. We’ll have plenty of time to play later. I am really tired.”

Before this we had walked for hours with skis on our back, being half buried in the snow. Only Haruhi’s muscles are not totally worked to exhaustion it seems.

“That’s true…”

Haruhi seems to want to know which side the others are on. After examining everyone’s expressions:

“Fine, alright, let’s take a break. But once we wake up I want everyone to play with their all.”

She announces with the glow of two to three nebulae coming from her pupils.

After everyone returns to their respective den, I start to engage in a self-personality meeting inside my head as I lie on the bed to think of a way out. Sadly my personalities just had to expose my uselessness right at this moment as not even one constructive proposal comes out. Everyone

stays silent, hoping that someone will break the ice. As the time passes by, minute by minute, my conscious becomes more and more hazy. Why would I say that?

“Kyon-kun.”

I didn’t even catch the sound of the door closing, or the footsteps of someone entering the room, nor the sound of rustling clothing. I got scared from this anyway, and I am just shocked by the silhouette of the person standing in the middle of the room.

“Asahina-san?”

The light in the room comes reflected off the snow, shining through the window with the shade pulled to one side. However, even in this dim light, I am sure that what I am seeing is correct. The one here is the cute fairy stationed in the clubroom, the lucky charm of the SOS Brigade, Asahina-san.

“Kyon-kun…”

Asahina-san reveals a smile on her face as she calls my nickname, moves ever so lightly and sits by my side. I scramble to sit up straight, as her naked legs close on each other. There is an unexplainable surreal sense somehow. Looking closely, what she is wearing right now is different from the moment that we bid each other goodnight across the hallway. It is not that single long T-shirt, but the amount of cloth hasn’t increased by much. At this time, Asahina-san is looking up at me, dressed in a white shirt that is almost ripped from my imagination, and she cannot get any closer to me.

“Well…”

That beautiful, childish face seems to want something.

“May I sleep over here?”

Her speech is enough to put both my lungs in my mouth.

Those dewy eyes look straight at my face as this cheeky Asahina-san leans on my shoulder softly. Wha… whawhawhat is this about?

“I was scared by myself, kept tossing around and couldn’t fall asleep… if I am beside Kyon-kun, I should be able to get a good sleep…”

Hot body temperature seeps through that shirt. It is a heat that someone could mistakenly think of as burning. Something soft is pressing on me. Asahina hugs my arm, and presses her face closer to me.

“Is it OK?”

This isn’t a matter of OK or not. There is no man or woman in this world that has the heart to turn down a pleading Asahina-san. So the answer is of course, yes, this bed is a bit too big for one person…. (hold it)

Hoho, she lets my arm go with a gorgeous smile, and starts to unbutton that shirt which is already very loose. That bedazzling, soft curve slowly starts to reveal itself. The full bosom that I saw when she was forced into being a bunny girl by Haruhi, that I saw when I accidently barged into the clubroom and saw her changing, that I caught in a photo now sleeping deep within a hidden folder on the hard drive of the computer … was now before me. (wake up, that’s not it) Only two buttons left on the white shirt… no, one. This is more tempting than even full nudity, since the model is of high quality. Besides, no matter how you put it, the one doing these provoking poses is Asahina-san. (hey) Asahina-san takes a glance at me with her eyes tilting upward, and tosses a shy, teasing smile my way. Her finger finally lets the last button loose. Should I move my sight elsewhere? (keep your focus!) From the innards of the completely unbuttoned shirt, pure white skin moves up and down with each breath. On the body of this person that is so artistically crafted to perfection that even Venus herself will cower inside the clamshell (not telling you to look that way), on top of the half mound over that smooth and round breast, lies a very visible star…

A deep breath comes forth from the depths of my throat.

“Hoo…!”

I jump out of my bed as if I had a spring in me.

“No way!”

Look closely! Why is it that I didn’t notice this? The person before me is not ‘my Asahina-san’. I should have known better than anyone else. Didn’t I do this last time to verify for authenticity? You would know after looking at ‘that spot’ on Asahina-san.

“Who are you?”

—There is no mole on the left breast of this Asahina-san. The half-naked beauty sitting on the bed talks with a distressed look.

“Why? You don’t want me?”

If this were the real Asahina-san (I told you she’s not it!), I should still be able to hang on. No, nope. The problem isn’t that. Asahina-san would never sneak in and seduce me. I am hooked without her having to do that.

“You are not Asahina-san.”

I keep retreating, and gazing upon those alluring eyes that are about to burst into tears. My reason is about to derail. How can a man make a lady sad. This isn't related to her not being Asahina-san right? (get a grip of yourself)

"Please don't do this."

I finally utter this out.

"Who are you? Are you the maker of this strange house, an alien or a slider? Why did you do this?"

"…Kyon-kun."

The Asahina-san before me sounds so sad. Her head lies low and her lips are twisted from being depressed. And then—

"!"

She turns around and flies to the door like wind, her shirt lifted about in the air. The moment she leaves the room, she turns around, looks at me with tears in her eyes and heads to the hallway. The bang is surprisingly loud, and that sound wakes my memory. I locked the inner lock. Without a key there should be no way to get in from outside.

"Please, wait a second!"

In that instant I suddenly say this in a respectful tone and run to the door to open it. Bang! A loud noise is made. No matter how forceful I get, the sound of a door opening shouldn't be so intense that my abdomen would tremble. Just as I thought of this—

"Ehh, you…"

I run straight into Haruhi. Haruhi, with her room directly opposite mine, has her head out of the door, and looks at me with her mouth wide open.

"Kyon, you were in my room a moment ago… or were you?"

There are more people than just Haruhi and me with their head stuck out into the hallway.

"Umm…"

Haruhi's neighbor to the right, 'T-shirt' clad Asahina-san is also puzzled and has her door half-open. As for the neighbor to the left—

"…"

Nagato's slim body is present. I look over the side—

“What was that…”

Koizumi touches the tip of his nose, and gives me a strange look along with a very awkward smile.

It becomes clear that the reason why the reverberation from opening the door was so loud was because all five of us had opened our doors at the same time. This would be the resonance of an ensemble of five.

“Why everyone? Something happen?”

Haruhi’s mind returns first and talks as if she is staring right at me.

“Why is everyone out of their room at the same time?”

I went after the fake Asahina-san- just as I was thinking of saying that, I realized something. Haruhi’s prior words were not grammatically sound.

“How about you then? You wouldn’t be out to go to the toilet.”

Surprisingly, Haruhi actually lowers her head, bites on her lower lip and only opens up after some time.

“I had the strangest dream. I dreamed that you had sneaked into my room and you didn’t talk like you would have… urr, and you did things that you wouldn’t do. I found it odd… in the end, I punched you hard and you ran off! that’s an odd dream! Right? But it didn’t feel quite like a dream.”

If that was a dream, then this would be a continuation of the dream. As I look at the vexed Haruhi with locked eyebrows, Koizumi heads to my direction.

“I, as well.”

He stares right at my face.

“You appeared in my room as well. The appearance might have been you, but the behaviour was just terrifying… anyways, you did things that you wouldn’t do.”

I start to get frightened out of the blue. My sight moves away from that smiling face of Koizumi, seemingly up to something, and turns instead towards Asahina-san. This is the real McCoy. One look and there’s no question about it. How could I have mistaken that person as her? Whether it’d be the feel or in her actions, she cannot compare to the bona fide Asahina-san. Perhaps my gaze embarrasses her. Asahina-san blushes. Did I appear before her? Just as I assume that to be the case—

“Suzumiya-san came into my room.”

Her fingers are caught together and move uneasily.

“That strange Suzumiya-san… I don’t know how to describe it, was like a fake…”

Yes, definitely a fake. That is for sure, the problem for this to have happened. Why did fake versions of ourselves appear in each other’s room? Asahina-san in mine, I went to Haruhi and Koizumi’s rooms, and Haruhi in Asahina-san’s room…

“Nagato.” I keep pressing. “Who came into your room?”

The stoic façade of Nagato, who is in a t-shirt as is Asahina-san, lifts up and looks directly into me:

“You.”

Having said that in a whisper, she slowly closes her eyelids. And then—

“…Yuki?!”

With the background music composed of Haruhi’s puzzled shout on the side, I witness an unbelievable scene.

Nagato, the very Nagato Yuki falls, as if pressed down by an unseen demonic hand, flat on the ground.

“Yuki! What happened? Yuki…”

Everyone is too surprised to utter a word, and are dumbstruck frozen on the scene, with only Haruhi rushing in and lifting that small body up.

“Whoa… so hot! Yuki, are you alright? Yuki? Yuki!”

The sleeping face of Nagato had her eyelids shut and head slanted downwards. My instinct told me however that Nagato is not in a sound slumber. Haruhi hugs Nagato’s shoulder and hollers out with a sharp gaze:

“Koizumi-kun, get Yuki onto her bed quickly. Kyon, go find some ice pillows. There should be some over there. Mikuru-chan, go prepare the wet towels.”

Seeing how I, Asahina-san and Koizumi stand still, Haruhi barks out again:

“Hurry up!”

After seeing Koizumi lifting up the entirely collapsed Nagato, I head off downstairs in a hurry. Ice pillow, ice pillow, ice pillow, where might the ice pillow be?

It would be that I hadn't fully recovered from the shock of seeing Nagato fainted that led me to be frozen in place earlier. It just seems to be impossible. That's why the case of fake Asahina-san in my room and fake versions of ourselves roaming about in each others' rooms is something that I am just so sick of that I want to forget about it. Leave it alone. That has nothing to do with me.

"Damn!"

This is just bad. Curses. I was hoping to let Nagato live a peaceful life like a normal person for the next few days, who knew that the exact opposite would happen. There is no trace of any ice pillow anywhere, so I wind up in the kitchen by instinct. My own ice mat is not in the emergency kit, but in the fridge. Where would it be in this strange house?

"Wait."

I stop my hand as I hold onto the handle of the fridge door. I pray as hard as I can in my head after having visualized the image of an ice pillow in my head. Following that, I open the fridge.

"…There."

The blue ice pillow sits atop the cabbage. Everything really is provided for. This is way too convenient. I don't know who pays such attention to detail, but it will only lead to an undesired outcome. I am more resolute thanks to

that fellow. We definitely can't stay in a place like this.

I have walked all the way out of the dining room with the rock solid ice pillow, and I see Koizumi standing over in the entrance hall, giving attention to the door at the portal. What is he doing here? Did the right honorable Haruhi order him to dig out snow to cool Nagato down? Just as I am about to give him a few words of advice, Koizumi has spotted me and opens up first:

"You have come just in time. Take a look at this."

And he points to the door.

I swallow my saliva and look towards where his points to. I see something quite incredible, and am so surprised as to be choked of words.

"What… what is that!"

That is all that I can squeeze out of myself.

“We didn’t see this before.”

“Yes, this was not here. I was the last one to have entered the house. When I shut the door, I did not see anything like it at the time.”

On the inner side of the door, something hard to describe is attached to it. The closest things to compare it to would be control panels or interface panels I guess.

A board about fifty centimeters in length is embedded into the door- or is it an interface panel? A bunch of symbols and numbers that give me nothin but headaches are written on the panel. I look at them patiently. The top row is —

x–y = (D–1)–z

The bottom row is labelled:

x= ? , y= ? , z= ?

? part is concave inward. It’s only just short of having someone tell you to socket something in. Just as I look at those indentations with a confused look—

“The accessories are over here.”

Koizumi points to a group of numbered blocks placed inside a wooden frame on the floor. Looking at it closely I see that three rows of digits from 0 to 9 are stored there. I bend down to take one out and have a look at it. The appearance is like a Mahjong tile as is the weight. The only difference is that the pattern carved onto it is that single digit Arabic numeral. Ten kinds of digits are divided into three groups, and placed in a flat wooden box.

“These should be the numbers that we are to use to solve the equation.” Koizumi picks one up as well to examine it. “Perhaps they are to be slotted into the empty squares.”

I look back at that equation and my head hurts again. Mathematics has always been a source of pain as a matter of course for me.

“Koizumi, can you solve this?”

“I seem to recall the equation, but these hints are not enough. If this is purely to equate the values on both sides, then there exists an innumerable amount of possible combinations. To reduce that number to only one set, there need to be more conditions set.”

I look at the most unique letter out of the four.

“What would this D be? It might not need to be resolved.”

“It is the only one in upper case.”

Koizumi plays with his number 0 tile and says in a lowered voice:

“This equation… I really have seen it before, but I have no idea that it would appear over here… what is it? I keep thinking that I have had seen this only recently…”

He locks his eyebrows and stands still. A rarity for Koizumi to show such a face deep in thought.

“So? Do you think there’s special meaning in that?”

I put my tile back into the wooden frame.

“I know that a mathematical question suddenly appeared from the inner side of the door, but what does that mean?”

“Hmm.”

Koizumi’s attention returns.

“I think this might be the key, since the double door is locked. To open it from the inside is impossible. It is a waste of effort to try turning the handlebar.”

“What did you say?”

“Go ahead and try it for yourself. See, there is no keyhole over the inner side of the doors, nor is there a key slot.” I tried and can’t open it.

“Who might have locked it? Even if this were an automatic, it should be openable from the inside.”

“This further proves indirectly that this space is beyond common sense.”

Koizumi returns to his meaningless smile.

“The identity of the perpetrator is unknown, but it is clear that the opponent intends to imprison us in here. The windows have been sealed shut and the doors soundly locked…”

“If so, just what is the equation on the interface panel for? Some puzzle for us to pass the time?”

“If my guess, if correct, this equation would be the key for us to open the door.”

Koizumi continues with a carefree tone:

“I also think that this is the last means of escape that Nagato-san has left for us.”

I have reawakened my recent memories, and am totally immersed in recollection, but Koizumi pays no heed to it and keeps up with his rhetorics.

“This can be said to be an information conflict. It is a kind of warfare that is under some form of limitation. Someone has imprisoned us in this alternate space, and Nagato-san has left us with an escape route in advance to combat this dark faction. This equation is the result. We should be able to return to our world by solving the equation, or else we will remain here.”

Koizumi knocks on the door.

“I am not clear as to what kind of a battle it is, but if it is an all-out struggle between some sentient lifeforms, it would be waged on a plane beyond our imagination, and this is only the physical manifestation of that struggle. That interface should be the end product of this fight.”

An equation that is totally out of place in this strange, mysterious house.

“It is no coincidence that soon after our strange dream, Nagato-san fainted and this interface panel appeared… these events are not isolated phenomena, but are all somehow interrelated.”

Koizumi goes on, being quite good at hiding the anxiety in his heart.

“This would be a key out of this alternate space, an escape key forged by Nagato-san.”

That makes me look all over the board for any markings of ‘Copyright © Yuki Nagato’. Unfortunately I cannot find such a thing.

“Basically, this is only my own prediction. Nagato-san has only limited powers at her disposal inside this space. Seeing as her connection to the Integrated Data Sentient Entity has been severed, she could only use her innate abilities, which resulted in this roundabout solution.”

You may call it prediction, but your tone is rather decisive.

“Hmm, that is true. The ‘Organization’ has tried to make contacts with other sources of connection, so I do hold a certain amount of intelligence.”

Although I really would like to hear more about other aliens, it simply isn’t the time for that. The pressing matter is to solve this equation written on this interesting interface. As I look at the symbols on the interface panel as well as the group of numbers in that wooden frame, the calm voice of Nagato comes to mind.

“This space is providing significant stress to me.”

I do not know who might have set the trap to lure us into this weird house in the snow, but I definitely cannot forgive the person that caused Nagato to have a high fever and to faint. That and the alien bastard won’t have their way! No matter what, we will all leave this place and return to Tsuruya-san’s villa! No exceptions, the entire SOS Brigade will leave this place.

Nagato has already done her part. Although I did not witness it nor had I heard of it, she no doubt had been waging warfare against the invisible ‘enemy’ since we had intruded into this alternate

space. This must have been the reason why she seemed more withdrawn than usual. She fought with everything she had, but she still left us a small opening. Well then, what comes next would be for us to open this door.

“We have to leave this place.”

Koizumi returns a crisp smile towards my declaration.

“I plan to do so as well. No matter how comfortable, this is not a place to stay in. Utopia and Dystopia are two sides of the same mirror.”

“Koizumi.”

The seriousness in my tone surprises even myself.

“Can you not bore a hole into the gates somehow? The situation is rather grim. Nagato has already fallen ill, so the only one that has any power is you.”

“You have overestimated me by far.”

Even faced with such adversity, Koizumi still responds with a smile.

“I have never said that I am an all-powerful esper. My abilities can only be triggered under a certain set of conditions. This is something that you should—”

I grab the front of his shirt and pull him over before Koizumi finishes his bullshit.

“I don’t want to hear that!”

I stare at Koizumi and his sneering, smirking lips.

“Alternate space is your speciality. Asahina-san cannot be depended upon, and Haruhi’s a bomb that can go off at any time. Didn’t you show off your powers the last time when we faced the cricket? Or is it that the ‘Organization’ festers a bunch of nincompoops?”

Actually, I am like that too. I can’t do anything, not even the most basic of sound judgments. I can say that I am lower than Koizumi. The only thing that I can think of at the moment is to beat Koizumi into a bloody pulp, and then have him pummel me back. I can’t vent my anger by punching myself since I will go easy on myself.

“What the hell are you all doing?”

A sharp sound shoots out from behind us, and it seems to be rather displeased.

“Kyon, didn’t I tell you go find ice pillows? I ran down after having to wait for an eternity on you, and lo and behold, you and Koizumi are practicing how to fight. Just what is your head loaded with?”

Haruhi has her arms crossed about her waist, and stands firmly with both legs. The scene looks like an old man that lives around my house catching a thief stealing persimmons red-handed.

“Still goofing around at this hour! Think of Yuki, even for a second!”

Haruhi treats the standoff between Koizumi and me as mere play, maybe because her heart is elsewhere. I let Koizumi loose and pick up the ice pillow that dropped onto the ground some time ago. Haruhi grabs it from me.

“What is that?”

Haruhi’s sight quickly converges on that strange equation. Koizumi straightens himself out and answers:

“No idea. Both of us were thinking about this. Does Suzumiya-san have any opinion?”

“Isn’t that the Euler formula?”

Haruhi says that without even thinking, what a bummer. Koizumi responds:

“You mean Leonhard Euler? The mathematician?”

“Yes, the mathematician, but I don’t know his name.”

Koizumi re-examines the strange interface panel, and stares for several seconds.

“Yes.”

He snaps his fingers as if he is acting in front of somebody.

“This is the Euler’s Planar Graph Formula, or rather a variation. As expected of Suzumiya-san.”

“It might not be it. That D though must mean dimensional factor. I guess.”

Whether or not that is correct, I have a bunch of questions in my head. Who is Euler, and what did he do? What is the Planar Graph Theorem? Did we ever do this in math class? Just as I am about to raise my questions, I suddenly remember that I have mostly slept through my math classes! So I don’t dare to raise my doubts.

“No, this is not a part of the high school curriculum. However the seven bridges of Königsberg question should not be foreign to you.”

Ahh, that one I know. Math taught by Yoshizaki would occasionally refer to some of these hard questions during his lectures. This question would be that illustration showing two islands and streams with interconnecting bridges? I remember that there is no solution.

“That’s right.” Koizumi nods. “That problem is on a flat plane, but Euler proved that one can view a surface as a three-dimensional object. The Planar Formula is one of his many legendary works.”

Koizumi continues to explain.

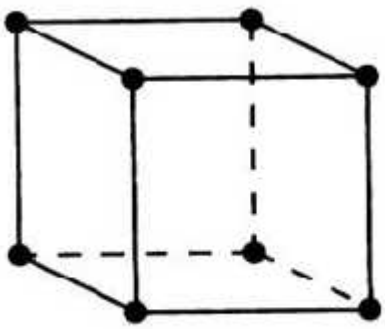
“This principle holds for all polyhedra. The result of taking the number of vertices plus the number of sides minus the number of edges must be 2.”

“…”

Having seen that look of wanting to toss aside all things related to mathematics, Koizumi gives a wry smile and puts one hand behind his back.

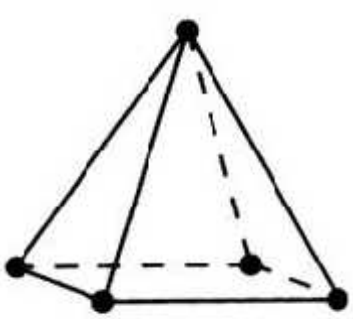
He takes a black oil-based marker out. Where’d he get that? Was it purposely hidden? Or the same way that I got the ice pillow?

Koizumi kneels on the ground and starts to doodle on the red carpet. Neither Haruhi nor I try to stop him, seeing as no one cares if someone is painting graffiti all over this place. Koizumi creates the picture of a dice-like polyhedron.



“As you can see, this is a regular hexahedron. The number of vertices is 8, the number of surfaces is 6. There are 12 edges. 8+6–12=2… that is true, is it not?”

As if that weren't enough, Koizumi has drawn a new shape.

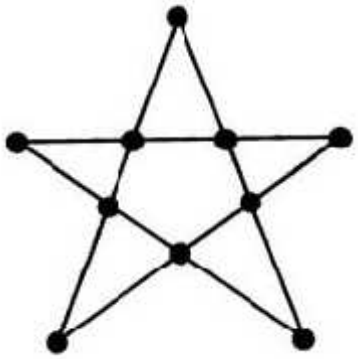


"This time I have drawn a pyramid. There are 5 vertices, and 5 surfaces. There also 8 lines. 5+5–8 is still 2. Therefore, even if the number of sides increases to hundreds of sides, the answer is still 2 (the Euler characteristic), which sums up Euler's polyhedra principle."

"Really? I think I got that then. But… what does Haruhi mean for dimensional factor?"

"That is very simple. The principle can be used not only on three-dimensional objects, but also on flat surfaces. It's just that the formula becomes 'points + sides - edges = 1'. The seven bridges problem is rooted from this principle."

A new sketch appears on the carpet.



"As you can see, this is a five point star drawn with a single stroke."

This time around I will count it out for myself. There are 1,2… 10 vertices. Sides well… 6 surfaces. Lines is the biggest with um… total of 15. The answer of 10+6–15 is 1. While I was busy counting, Koizumi has already completed the fourth graph. It looks like a misdrawn Big Dipper.

“This applies even with such a doodle.”

You really don’t need to go through the trouble. Alright, since you’ve drawn it, I might as well take the time and add it up. Umm… there are 7 vertices, 1 surface… lines… maybe 7? I see, the answer really is 1.

Koizumi puts the cap back on his pen with his signature smile.

“At any rate, the characteristic is 2 for three-dimensional polyhedron, and 1 for planar objects. Got it? Now take a look at the equation.”

The pen points to the interface panel.

“x–y = (D–1) –z is. x is the number of vertices, and we can derive by reworking the Euler Formula that y would be the edges. It is only evident after examination that z, originally on the left, would be the number of sides and has been shifted to the right and negated. As for this (D–1), if we substitute in the Euler characteristic where 2 would be for three-dimensional objects and 1 for planar, D would be respectively 3 or 2. That D would be initial for ‘Dimension’.”

I listen silently and work my brain while at this. Hmm. I have a general idea now. So the equation on the board is related to Mr. Euler’s what’s that called principle, I got it.

“And then?”

I ask.

“What would the answer be? What numbers in the frames are we to use to substitute for x,y and z?”

“Well…”

Koizumi answers.

“Without the original polyhedron or the planar graph to use as reference, I cannot resolve that.”

Isn’t that just a load of crap, where is that? Where are we going to find that original graph that you have mentioned?

Don’t know- Koizumi lifts his shoulder, and I start to panic. Just then—

Haruhi, seeming totally lost in the equation, suddenly barks out as if she remembers something:

“This really isn’t important — oh yeah, Kyon!”

What the hell!

“You better go and visit Yuki later on!”

I will go without you having to remind me, but do you really have to boss me around and coax me like that?

“Because that girl called out your name, although only once.”

My name? That Nagato? You’re kidding?

“What did she call me?”

“Just ‘Kyon’!”

Nagato has never called me by my name, not even once. Ahh, that is to say, be it my name or my nickname, Nagato has never called me by them. Whenever we talk face to face she always refer to me in second person… An irregular thin sense of emotion lifts from my chest.

“No…”

Koizumi objects.

“Is it really ‘KYON’? Are you sure that you have not have made a mistake?”

What’s he up to? Got an opinion on Nagato’s murmuring?

“Suzumiya-san, this is very important. Please try to remember.”

This is quite strong a wording for Koizumi. Even Haruhi finds it surprising, as she thinks back with her eyes looking up above.

“Hmm… well I didn’t catch it very clearly. It might not have been KYON. That and she whispered it. It could’ve been HYON or ZEON. It is definitely not KYAN or KYUN.”

“I see.”

Koizumi answers in satisfaction.

“So that means the first syllable is unclear so we only caught the end. Hahaha, so that’s it. Nagato-san might not have meant to say KYON, or even ZYON, but YON (four).”

“Four?” I said.

“Yes, the very number ‘4’.”

“So what if it’s 4…”

I stopped and look back at the equation.

“Hey!”

Haruhi impatiently toots her lips.

“We haven’t the time to play around with this number game! Would you worry about Yuki for a second? I can’t stand you two!”

She tosses the ice pillow as her eyes forms into triangles.

“You’ve better take a look at Yuki! You hear!”

After belting that out, she stomps, stomps, and stomps as she heads upstairs. We send her away with our eyes, and Koizumi only starts the conversation after she’s gone, full of confidence in both tone and looks.

“All the conditions are now present. We can now solve for x, y, z.”

“Please think back to our prior encounter. The fake version event that Suzumiya-san thought of as a dream, but I find it hazily real.”

Koizumi picks up the pen again as he bends his back.

“Let us draw a graph showing whose apparition appeared in whose room.”

Koizumi starts by drawing a dot on the carpet, and labels it ‘KY’.

“This would be you. Asahina-san went to your room.”

From there a line is extended and a dot is made on its end and is labelled ‘ASA’.

“Suzumiya-san appeared in Asahina-san’s room.”

This time, he draws a line to the rear left diagonally, and writes ‘SUZU’ on the new dot.

“The one that has entered into Suzumiya-san’s room would be you.”

And following that, he extends a line from ‘SUZU’ to ‘KY’ and completes a right triangle.

“And the one that entered my room would be you. Ahh, I should say a person that looks like you but not you. I believe that you would not have done what he did even if you went insane.”

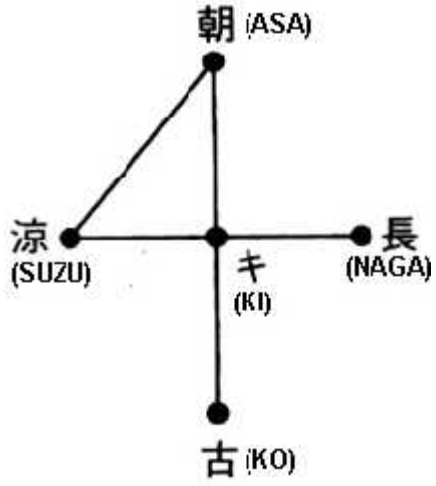
A line is drawn downward through ‘KY’ and the point is called ‘KO’.

“Nagato-san also said that you have entered into her room.”

Now I see. Koizumi seals the pen and stops after drawing a line extended from my point to the right, an end point called ‘NAGA’.

“Everything is interrelated. It almost seems that the fake versions of ourselves that appeared seemingly in dream and for real were apparitions made by Nagato-san.”

I stare at the newest graph made by Koizumi without moving my eyes from it.



It is exactly a ‘4’ drawn in one stroke.

“It is now just a matter of directly applying this graph towards the equation on the door. This graph happens to be related to our double. Since it is a planar graph, D would be ‘2’.”

Koizumi brushes his fringes aside and continues with a smile:

“x=5, y=5, z=1. That is the answer. Both sides reduce to 0.”

I save myself the time to stay in awe or to praise it at all, as I hurry myself to get those tiles. Three of them. Now that the answer’s out, what are we waiting for! However Koizumi seems to still have some last doubts.

“What I am afraid is whether or not this is a delete program?”

Let’s ask first. What would that be?

“If we are really duplicated copies of our personalities, then there exists no reason to really go out of our way to leave this alternate space, so long as our originals stay safe and sound in the real world.”

Koizumi lays his hands out.

“This mechanism might be set up so that the moment we solve this equation, we will be deleted. For us, such action would amount to suicide. Do you wish to carry on with our lives here forever with no change whatsoever, or would you rather be deleted? Which do you prefer?”

Neither. Although I don’t have the will to have eternal life, but I am not so down as to hope for my demise right now. I am me. There is no one that can substitute for me.

“I believe in Nagato.”

Even I am surprised by how calm I appear to be.

“I believe in you as well, for I believe your answer is the correct one. However that trust is only limited to that equation.”

“I see.”

Koizumi smiles kindly as if he knows telekinesis. Following that he takes a step back.

“I leave the rest to you. Should something go wrong, I will stand with you by the side of Suzumiya-san, for it is my duty and my mission.”

It’s fine if that’s what you want, as long as you’re happy with it. There aren’t many jobs that you are actually happy to do in this world.

Koizumi retracts his smile slightly, and shows a degree of earnestness.

“If we really do return to normal space, then I would like to make a promise to you.”

He continues calmly.

“Following this, should anything happen that will push Nagato-san into a tight corner, I will betray the ‘Organization’ once and stand by your side no matter how beneficial it might be for the ‘Organization’.”

Why stand by my side? Standing by Nagato’s side is the right thing to do.

“Should such a situation develop, you will no doubt be the first to support Nagato-san. Helping you will amount to helping Nagato-san, although it may be by proxy.”

His lip twitches.

“Personally, I believe Nagato-san is a vital member. When the time comes, I will lend a hand to Nagato-san. Although I may be a part of the ‘Organization’, I am the deputy chief of the SOS Brigade before that.”

A look of concern fills Koizumi’s eyes, and the expression on his face seems to have the determination to deny any way of backing out, as well as having relinquished the right to defend himself. If so, I don’t need to hold back and should just do what my gut instinct tells me to do. In the middle of December- I was left all alone in a foreign world, and had only managed to escape by running everywhere. This time of course I will do the same. However, unlike that time I am not fighting alone, but instead am working with everyone in the SOS Brigade to find a way out of here. Ryugu-jo is not worth longing for. It is not we but this space that must vanish.

Without any hesitation, I slide the tiles into their designated slots. ‘Click’ — a small but crisp noise is heard. It is very much like the sound of door being unlocked. I focus all of my attention onto the handle, and it turns! The gates slowly open.

“__”

There have been times in the past when I was too taken aback to say anything. Or I was dumbfounded, or in hysteria or even absolutely mortified! All sorts of similar experiences come to mind: “You’re not joking?” But after living through time and space being bent like a rubber band, even I was about as resilient as a cockroach after being sprayed, and to totally collapse right about now would not be surprising. Looks like I better retreat for now. I, the one that opened the heavy gates—

“__”

—have entered into a state where I can’t make a noise no matter how hard I try. I cannot believe what I am seeing. Why are my optic nerves sending such a scene into my brain? Is it because I

have finally snapped? Is it that my retina and cornea have finally given up? The piercing light makes me dizzy. The bright sunlight shines from the above.

"—This is…"

The weather is as clear as a crystal ball. Not even a snow flake has fallen upon us, let alone a snow storm. It is clear as far as the eye can see, without a cloud in the sky. There exists only…

…The lift cables cutting across our field of vision. The swinging seats have pairs of skiing couples on them. My fumbling feet, for some reason, have become so hard to lift.

It is the snow. I am caught in a field of snow. The glittering white landscape dazzles my eyes, driving me ever more faint.

I feel as if something is up, and when I lift my head, a figure whisks by me in a hurry.

"Whoa?!"

I jump in reflex as I follow the shadow with my eyes. The skier had dodged me as if I was an obstacle on a ski run.

"This is…"

The skiing ground, simple as that. Without taking even a close look, one can see the skiers everywhere having all kinds of fun as they come into view quite naturally.

I look to the side, and I suddenly feel as if my shoulders have quite some weight on them. That would be from having the skis and the poles on my back. After that I look at my feet, and I find myself wearing ski boots. As for what I am wearing right now, well it is the skiing outfit that I was given before I stepped out of Tsuruya-san's mansion. I turn around hurriedly.

"Aaa…"

Asahina-san looks like a Koinobori (carp flag) in the wind, with her mouth and eyes wide open.

"Unbelievable…"

Koizumi looks at the sky in astonishment. Both of us are in familiar getup and definitely not in T-shirts.

That strange house has vanished without a trace. Looks like it will not appear again. This is just a simple skiing paradise. The mansion unmarked by maps has evaporated to the point that there

isn't even any steam left…

…To put it another way.

“Yuki?!”

From where the sound originated it seems that Haruhi is dead ahead! I turn my head and eyeballs around to look for her.

Haruhi is right next to Nagato as she helps Nagato out of the snow.

“Are you alright, Yuki? You’re still running a fever… eh?”

Haruhi glances around like a Hyrax peeking out of its den.

“That’s odd… we were in the mansion.”

And then, she finally sees me.

“Kyon, something’s up…”

I have not replied, and have merely put my skis and poles down and kneel beside Nagato. Haruhi and Nagato are both wearing the same set of clothes that they were in before the snow storm, when we were ‘racing’.

“Nagato.”

Answering my call, her hair moves slightly and she slowly lifts her head.

“…”

The poker face is still frozen as those pupils as large as they usually are look toward me. Nagato, with snow all over her, fixes her sight on my face just like that.

“Yuki!”

Haruhi knocks me out of the way, and is now holding Nagato.

“I don’t really know what had happened, but… Yuki, are you awake? Are you still running a fever?”

“No.”

Nagato replies lightly, as she stands on her own feet.

“I have merely tripped.”

“Really? But you were running a fever before.. eh? What happened?”

Haruhi puts her hand on Nagato’s forehead.

“Wow! Your fever is gone. But…”

Her eyes come back after having taken a panning view of the scenery.

“Eh? Snowstorm…? mansion…? No way? That wasn’t like a dream… Ehhhh? Or… was that really a dream?”

Don’t ask me about it. I can deny technical support service to you and just you. As I am planning to feign innocence, the sound of a lively “hey–!” comes to me from a short distance away.

“What’s up?”

Tsuruya-san shouts out. Three snowmen from large, middle to small stand next to her, and a figure about as tall as the medium one also to the side. That hopping figure that’s looking this way would be my little sister.

We have managed to reorient ourselves.

We are not far from where the lifts are and are only a little way from the novice trail. All five of us present.

“Sigh, nevermind.”

Haruhi has decided to not press any further.

“Yuki, I will piggyback you, get up.”

“No need,” says Nagato.

“Oh yes!” Haruhi is determined. “I don’t really know what has happened, nor do I know why it is that I have no clue about it, but you’re really pushing yourself too hard. Although you’re not running a fever anymore, anyone can see that you’re not well. You need rest!”

Without waiting for any feedback from Nagato, Haruhi has lifted her up and starts running towards Tsuruya-san and my sister. Her pacing would have left even the fastest snow blower in the dust. If there was ever such a category as a hundred-meter dash in the snow while piggybacking a person in the Winter Olympics, Haruhi would no doubt have taken the gold.

Following that, Arakawa-san had us picked up after being notified by Tsuruya-san. Nagato was protesting somewhat about being treated as a patient by Haruhi, as she showed her vitality the Nagato way, but the look I gave her seemed to have an effect as she finally succumbed to Haruhi’s instructions.

Nagato, Haruhi, Asahina-san and my sister headed back to the villa first. Koizumi, Tsuruya-san and I took a walk to get back. In the middle of the walk, Tsuruya-san started off the conversation like so:

"That's odd, why is it that you all were heading out of the mountain with heavy footsteps and with skis on your back? Did something happen?"

Uhhh, no blizzard?

"Hmm? Ahh, you must be talking about that snowfall which lasted for ten minutes? It's not all that much of a big deal. It's just a short, sudden snowfall."

From the looks of it, us going in circles in the snow and spending an eternity in that strange house was but a few minutes to Tsuruya-san.

Tsuruya-san went on, full of life in her pacing and tone:

"I was wondering why y'all were coming down and falling all over the place. Lo and behold, it's because Nagato-chi took a nasty tumble. Thank goodness that she recovered from that so quickly."

Koizumi can only give a stiff smile at that and says nothing. I didn't talk either. The observer that was calmly analyzing this whole situation, in this case Tsuruya-san, found us just as she said. If so, let's just use her point of view as the reference. We might have been through wonderland or a dream world, but this is reality, where the original version of the world is located.

After walking in silence for quite a while, Tsuruya-san started to break into laughter once more, as she stuck her mouth next to my ear.

"Kyon-kun, lemme ask you somethin'."

What is it, sempai?

"I can tell that Mikuru and Nagato-chi are no ordinary folks, probably Haruhi-nyan is also a cut above?"

I examined Tsuruya-san with seriousness, and having found that her bright façade is just that, a plain bright outlook-

"So even you have found that out."

"I've reckoned that for quite a while! It's just that I haven't totally sorted out where the two of them've come from. But I'd say that they're doing some strange stuff behind our backs. Ahh, don't tell this to Mikuru. That kid keeps treatin' herself like she's an average Joe!"

She was laughing from her stomach, which must have been because of how I had reacted to that.

“Hmm, but Kyon-kun now is pretty normal. You reek of the same kinda smell that I’ve got.”

Following that, she started to look at my face.

“Nevermind. I don’t really wanna dig up dirt about what kinda person Mikuru is. You’d be having a hard time to answer. Who cares what she is, friends are friends.”

Haruhi, just stop with the honorary member or the honorary advisor thing and recruit Tsuruya-san as a regular member. This open-minded girl might be more suited than I for the role of being an understanding average person.

Tsuruya-san patted my shoulder with ease.

“Take care of Mikuru. If that kid has some things that she doesn’t want me to help her with, you’re gonna have to bear the brunt of that.”

That… is a definite yes.

“Although…”

Tsuruya-san’s eyes were glimmering even brighter:

“The movie that time, the one for the festival. Are the CGs for real?”

Koizumi might have had heard that, for I spotted him off to the side, shrugging his shoulders and having no comment.

The moment we have arrived at the villa, Nagato is hurried off to bed by Haruhi. The stifled expression has disappeared from her pale face and is replaced by that calm complexion. She is back to being that person that wavers ever so slightly like the swaying grass in a gust of wind, back to being the Nagato that I know.

As if they are all on vigil, both Asahina-san and Haruhi are sitting by Nagato’s bedside while my sister and Shamisen are on standby off to a corner. Perhaps they are waiting for me, Koizumi and Tsuruya-san, who have come in later. When we are all present, Haruhi speaks out:

“Hey Kyon. For some reason, I keep having thoughts that I had the most realistic dream. I dreamed that we arrived at a mansion, and took a bath in it as well as had some hot sandwiches there.”

You were just seeing things - just as I am about to say that, Haruhi continues.

“Yuki said that she has no idea, but Mikuru-chan says that she recalls the exact same thing that I’ve said.”

I look toward Asahina-san, and the miss-maid that just evokes pity returns an ‘I am sorry’ look. This is not good. I was hoping to just gloss it over by calling all of it a daydream or some kind of illusion, and now I can’t think of a good roundabout way to explain when the two have the exact same dream.

As I ponder about how to lie to Haruhi,

“It is collective hypnosis.”

Koizumi looks at me with a ‘there there, leave it to me’ expression and cuts in.

“I actually recall similar things.”

“You’re saying that you and I both got hypnotized?” Says Haruhi.

“This is not a man-made hypnosis. Hypnosis for Suzumiya-san normally wouldn’t have worked since you might have doubts if it was announced beforehand that you were to be hypnotized.”

“True.”

Haruhi falls into silence.

“However, we had walked round and round in the snow mountain, with only a uniform white scenery. Are you aware of Highway Hypnosis? People that are driving on the highway can fall into a state of hypnosis by looking at the scene with the street lamps spaced out uniformly. This might be the phenomenon that has led to our situation. One falls asleep while taking the train due to the rhythmic vibrations in the cars. This is the same principle that applies to sending a baby to sleep by slow, rhythmic patting on its back.”

“Really?”

Haruhi shows a ‘first time that I’ve heard of this’ look as Koizumi nods deeply.

“Exactly.”

He continues on:

“While we were moving in the snowstorm, I think that somebody had said: ”It’d be great if there’d be a house that we can hide out at, and it’d be great if it’s fully equipped, really comfortable…” or something similar to that. At any rate, the mental state of people in a disaster will not be very good and, under such extreme stress, it is not surprising that incredible apparitions might overtake us. In story books, don’t travelers going through the desert often see mirages?“

Damn Koizumi, that was beautiful!

”Umm… maybe you’re right. So that’s basically what happened?“

Haruhi cocks her head and looks at me.

That’s right. I keep nodding along, trying to force an expression of sudden realization. Koizumi pushes along with me:

”The sound of Nagato-san falling must have awakened us to reality, it definitely must have been like that.“

”If you put it that way, I guess it really was like that…“

Haruhi cocks her head further, but she quickly aligns it back to normal.

”Fine, I’ll call it that. It’s absurd to think that there’d be such a house for us to shelter in when we got into trouble. My memory is getting kinda hazy on this. All of this is like a dream within a dream.“

Right, a dream. That weird house is not really there so don’t mind it too much, it’s just a figment of our imagination from fatigue.

The only thing that has me worried would be the two outsiders who are non-SOS members. I look at Tsuruya-san.

”Umm!“

Tsuruya-san blinks at me, all smiles. I read that as the code for “fine fine, let’s leave it at that”, although it might just be me getting worried too much. Tsuruya-san makes no comment and she doesn’t say anything more, only has her own signature smile on her face. As for the other person ? my little sister has already fallen asleep on Asahina-san’s lap. Although she can be as loud as a meowing cat while awake, she is adorable when asleep. Asahina-san looks at my little sister as if she is satisfied. It is kind of obvious that Asahina-san and my little sister didn’t catch even one word from the second part of Koizumi’s explanation.

Finally! After toiling for an eternity, the first night of the winter co-ed has arrived! Nagato seems to have trouble staying in bed, but is finally put down with a bedsheet by the screaming and jumping primate Haruhi.

I think that there’s no need to force Nagato to sleep. Even if you have a nice dream, it is still only a dream once you wake up. The important thing is that all of us are still together. No matter how exciting being on that glimmering stage might have been, if it is only an illusion that ceases to exist the moment you open your eyes, it has no meaning. I definitely have realized this deeply.

?

I have decided to leave certain things aside for now. All of them can be confirmed later, be it the background story to that weird house in the snow mountain or to wonder if Haruhi totally bought Koizumi's dazzling jargon-laden speech. Of course it seems that none of it matters with her busy at taking care of Nagato right this moment.

For some reason, I want to catch some air outside, which inadvertently means escaping from Haruhi's demonic voice reaching into my head. I don't feel cold for some reason while the stars, and the reflected starlight coming from the silvery landscape is unusually catching.

"But,"

The next day would be the last day of the year. Koizumi's carefully planned detective drama will unfold itself on New Year's Eve. Haruhi will also do her best with her holiday bash. Screw this, things will work out in the end. I only need to worry about taking good care of myself before those things occur. This happens to be a rare opportunity for Nagato to get some R&R. Who cares when she usually sleeps or if she even needs to in the first place, she can really unwind herself and fulfill her urge to sleep this time around. Putting Shamisen onto her bed is quite a nice idea, as it's great to have an instant bed heater!

I look at the endless snow field as I talk to myself.

"Just for tonight, please don't let a blizzard start up again."

If Nagato does dream when she sleeps, may she have a good dream… just for tonight, at least. At least I, personally, have no reason for wanting her to not have a good dream tonight.

Lastly, I am also going to make a wish to the stars. Although it isn't Tanabata, nor is it New Year's Eve, and it is totally off-tangent to the story of Altair and Vega, but I would like at least one star to take my wish, given how many stars are out there in the universe.

"May the coming year be a good year."

Please make it come true, whoever is up in those stars.

Author's Notes

Endless EIGHT

This volume in terms of how many sheets used for the draft would be about a hundred or so, out of those twenty of which are used for serialization in *The Sneaker*. It is a rare chance for me to be able to return to the earlier writing style. Although I am still a bit shaky with my work aptitudes, I feel a bit more relieved emotionally.

The Day of Sagittarius

I should clarify even if it doesn't matter that I am not really that particular about the naming of the game as in the novel, given that if I would snicker if I can clear the level of a game in a year. By the way, the game that I have been playing lately and manage to get to the last level is *Linda*^{3}. It is a blast. I should really get myself a Dreamcast.

Snow Mountain Syndrome

This is my newest work of intermediate length, and the longest piece so far. I keep thinking as of late about where'd the text editor that would automatically word wrap around the entire page go.

I purchased the following books as reference for this chapter. Here's a million and evermore thanks.

Fermat's Enigma: The Epic Quest to Solve the World's Greatest Mathematical Problem. Singh, Simon, translated by Aoki Kaoru, Shinchosha.

図形がおもしろくなる(Fun With Shapes). Oono Eiiti, New release by Iwanami Shounan.

By the way, should there be any mistake with the explanations as well as the use of formulae, blame them squarely on my lack of brain cells. There is no other reason, please bear with me.

Lastly, allow me to extend my deepest condolences.

On July 15, 2004, Yoshida Sunao sensei passed away.

Looking back to how I was able to meet Yoshida-sensei around the day of the spring goodwill convention for Kadokawa, after being awarded the Sneaker prize. That was ten days after I was notified by phone. At the time I was just a newcomer without any clout whatsoever. The only things to do being on the ground of the goodwill convention with so many literary greats were to greet the seniors and to introduce oneself.

Just as my tension was rising to its limit, an impeccable gentleman approached me. He revealed an easy smile, tapped my shoulder and said:

“Hey, new guy!”

That man would be Yoshida-sensei.

“Hey, new guy!”—the phrase that Yoshida-sensei said to me cannot be more crisp and assuring.

After that, Yoshida-sensei chatted briefed with me, whose brain was frozen and so stiff that I can only mutter “not at all” or “nonono” and so forth, then shows his smile again:

“See you then.”

He leaves as such. That would be the first, and the last time that I would see Yoshida-sensei.

After that I came down with the flu and was in my bed for three days before I came to, and I regretted for how I responded that day. Keeping that in mind, I wanted to greet him first the next time we meet and I even thought of the opener in advance.

Unexpectedly, I missed the chance, only to never have the opportunity to have a real talk with Yoshida-sensei. However, I firmly believe that up there, Yoshida-sensei can definitely hear the calls from this corner of the Earth.

Because I have been preparing and waiting to make this call for the longest time.

“Hey senior!”

I borrow this length of margin to pray for Yoshida-san’s spirit.

—Tanigawa Nagaru

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